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VERONICA SHALE, idealistic daughter of a famous R.A.F. pilot, loved Alan Grierson and expected to marry him. Among all their friends it was always "Alan and Veronica," and no one suspected, least of all Veronica herself, that Alan would fail to escort her to the guest-night dance at the R.A.F. camp, or that he would appear there with attractive blonde Alise Cheam instead. Flight Lieutenant Michael Carson offered to substitute for Alan for the evening, and it was he who saw Veronica's bitter humiliation when the announcement was made of Alan's engagement to Alise and he who helped her escape from the curious eyes and the startled sympathy. Michael took her away from the party and the people and let her pour out her disillusion; and he didn't know how profoundly he himself was being affected. But a week later he offered Veronica marriage and a new life with him in Egypt.

So begins an engrossing novel about two believable young people who challenged fate and their own emotions by making a strange bargain and living it. An authentic and unusual background sets off its richly patterned love story.

Uncharted Romance

MARY HOWARD

Uncharted Romance



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FIRST EDITION

Uncharted Romance

Chapter One

THE LITTLE HOUSE with its Tudor beams, gabled red roof and demure Georgian frontage looked directly on to Seadon High Street. As she stood before the gas fire in her bedroom, looking at the new dress, Veronica could hear voices raised in song and the clumsy sound of heavily booted feet on the pavement outside . . . young recruits on their way back to the big R.A.F. camp on the hill, where it sprawled its ugly rows of great red brick buildings, searing the gentle beauty of the countryside.

It was guest night and there was to be a dance at the mess, and she and Alan had been invited to join Billy Lennard's party. Billy Lennard, or to give him his full title, Flying Officer William Lennard, had been stationed at Seadon for some time, and he and Alan had become great friends. They played golf together, and Billy and his fellow officers occasionally hired riding horses from the once magnificent but now sadly depleted stables of the Grange. Alan was a gentleman-farmer, but, as Veronica had once

said to him, "It is a great pity, my sweet, that you are so much of a gentleman and so little of a farmer."

Veronica was twenty-two. She had known Alan since her school days . . . they had been unofficially engaged for two years. Still waiting for the time when funds would permit them to buy a ring and announce their intentions to the world.

She looked at her dress critically. It was a very pretty dress and chosen skillfully to emphasize her soft, dark beauty. It was made of tulle, a pale, corn-colored tulle, with thin shoulder straps. At the waist was a narrow blue velvet ribbon and a great cluster of artificial field flowers—scarlet poppies, blue cornflowers, heads of wheat, white daisies. She would wear a pair of blue sandals with it, and when she slipped it over her shoulders and fastened it into place and brushed back her soft dark hair into shining waves and curls she looked like a slim young Ceres . . . a harvest goddess.

The dress was new. . . . Mummy had bought it out of her half year's dividends, unknown to her stepfather. Veronica didn't need a new dress. . . . Neither of them had said anything beyond her mother's, "You ought to have a new dress for the dance at the camp" . . . but both mother and daughter knew that the dress was—well, if not an investment, a definite lure. But in different ways. Mrs Crane thought that it was high time Veronica and that young Grierson became engaged . . . they had been going together for two years now, and people talked.

Veronica thought, "If I am lovelier than anyone there perhaps Alan won't want to wait any longer. Perhaps he'll see how foolish it is. It's not necessary. Mummy will give me a little money, enough for my clothes. I wouldn't be a burden. I could get the dairy going again for him. . . . I

understand that sort of work . . . and the chickens . . . he makes no money at all out of the eggs now, with Lady Anna having zabaglione and angel cake and keeping a French chef . . . giving all the eggs away to her friends when they should be going to market. . . .”

She sat on her bed, her legs curled up, her tulle skirts frothing round her. In her glimmering, dark, rather vulnerable beauty she was like one of those paintings by Romney of shy, sweet, dark-eyed children. There was a sudden ache of fear within her . . . she adored Alan. As a child she had loved her father, and she had subconsciously resented her mother marrying again, although it was natural that a timid woman like Mrs Crane would seek security in middle age.

“But how could she . . . how *could* she?” Veronica would think . . . perhaps as they were sitting at dinner, perhaps as she caught her stepfather’s steady snore during the Sunday sermon. “How could she after that first, wild, splendid love?” Timothy Shale, her own father, had been a pilot of the old school, a pioneer of civil aviation and long-distance flight . . . he had been lost on an attempt on the Australian flight record, leaving his widow and a little daughter with a small income and a memory of someone splendidly adventurous, brilliantly alive. . . . Veronica was like her father in her lovely eager youth, her fine dark eyes with their thick starry lashes, her soft, curling dark hair. . . .

And Alan had seemed to bring back some of her father’s splendid adventurous beauty. They were not alike, for Alan was blue eyed and brown haired, and he had none of Shale’s steely tempered courage and wise vision. But he was handsome and young and gaily adventurous, and he

fell in love with Veronica, and she fell in love with him, and it filled all her life, this love.

And yet tonight, in spite of her belief in their love, Veronica had a foolish feeling of fear. Not about Alan, but about herself. She had bought that dress with money her mother had offered, answering some half-revealed doubt in Mrs Crane's eyes with a sudden misgiving in her own heart. That new dress had been somehow an admission of doubt of herself and Alan . . . doubt of Alan's love for her and her ability to hold him. Oh, she was being utterly absurd and disloyal to harbor such groundless doubts. Alan had been just the same as he had always been, adoring, considerate, charming . . . and yet two years . . . two years was a long time. That first, fine careless rapture of love that had followed their first discovery of the feeling between them . . . it could not last. It was impossible and unnatural that it should. Even now, in many slight, almost invisible ways, it seemed to be wearing thin . . . it needed something else. It needed the strength and fulfillment of marriage. . . . She had to admit it. And yet was not this failure something within herself, the very fact that Alan, for all his affection for her, did not desire her sufficiently to forget the barriers to their marriage? She rose to her feet impatiently, trying to rule the irritating thoughts out of her mind. The dress made her infinitely desirable. That was what had been in her mind when she had bought it. To make him see her as an alluring, new, radiant being . . . and was not the very wish to appear so to him an admission of doubt and defeat?

Veronica sighed. She had that indescribable feeling for which a woman has no remedy to brace her but for which a man can take advantage of a stiff drink. It was too absurd. Her mind went over the past week, trying to re-

member something Alan might have said or done to account for her depression, and could recall nothing . . . until, yes . . . one small incident.

She had last seen him at the meet the day before yesterday. He had lent her his mare, Ladybird. Billy Lennard had ridden up and reminded them they were to join his party for the dance at the mess on the coming guest night. She had smiled inquiringly across at Alan, and he had said, his hands and attention taken up with his fidgety thoroughbred, "I'll ring you, Verry. . . . I think Mother has some people coming . . . the Cheams . . . you know them, Billy. . . ."

"Well," Billy said, "couldn't it be arranged for you to bring them too?"

And Veronica had had the strangest feeling . . . as though she were a girl whom he had taken out once or twice and who was fishing, rather unskillfully, for another invitation. Her spurred heel caught Ladybird's satin flank, making her rear and curvet, and for a moment her attention was taken up with soothing the mare. It was a little while before she could control her mount, and all the time her mind was saying, "It can't be me who is feeling like this . . . it *can't!* *This is Alan.* . . ."

Billy Lennard had said swiftly, as though he had sensed something of her inward distress, "I'll pick Verry up if you can't make it, Alan."

But Alan had said hurriedly, "No, of course not. I can make it all right. We may be a little late though."

She had been so used to hearing him say, "Quarter to eight promptly, darling." And they had always laughed a little at that, because although it was always Alan who said "promptly" it was Veronica who was the punctual one. Alan was nearly always late. The hounds moved off then,

and no more was said about it, and yesterday Alan had telephoned that he'd call for her at eight o'clock. An impulse had sent her hurtling off to town to buy, extravagantly, this new and exciting dress, so that he should see her . . . really see her again.

She picked up her long black velvet evening coat and her bag and went downstairs to the drawing room, where her mother and stepfather were sitting over their coffee before the fire. Mr Crane glanced up at her as she came in and asked shortly, "Alan coming?"

"He said he'd call about eight, but you know what he is."

She sat down on a low chair and helped herself to coffee. Mr Crane glanced up at the clock significantly—it was two minutes past eight—he sniffed significantly and said nothing. Again the stupid, reasonless fear ricocheted through her heart. Mr Crane disliked Alan. He had always thought she was wasting her time. His expression suggested that it was all she could expect, that Alan should be late. Mr Crane admired all the more solid virtues of which Alan had so few, and he distrusted the elegance and charm that Veronica adored.

Anger and pain and fear strove within her. Perhaps Alan could not help being late if his mother had guests. If she herself had doubts she resented other people voicing them. What was the matter with her tonight? They had not quarreled. Before they had often quarreled, bitterly and passionately, and had made it up with contrition and kisses, as lovers will. But tonight there was nothing of that sort. She had a sudden desperate, aching need of Alan. Of his tall, slender grace, his swift, amusing little glance of love that would come to her, perhaps when they were in a crowded room or were dancing with other partners, sin-

gling her out, finding her, making her veins start and ache with love for him. The memory of that look calmed her heart . . . it was so real. So much part of the sweet intimacy between them. She put her coffee cup down and began to talk to her mother about the village bazaar she was organizing. Mrs Crane talked in her gentle, nervous, deprecating voice, and the hands of the clock stole round toward the first quarter, passed it to a tiny chime of silver strokes and crept onward toward the half-hour.

Fifteen minutes . . . it seemed like fifteen agonizing hours. It came to Veronica, listening to her mother, that the village life held very little for her . . . that she would have been out of it, working at something, plunging herself into some interest, if it had not been for Alan. The long days of pleasant ineffectual pursuits had become a lotus land of love . . . horses, dances, long walks together, swift motor trips to the near-by market town for a flick and dinner . . . purposeless unless they had been filled with love and gay companionship.

Mr Crane said, heavily jovial, glancing up over his evening paper, "It looks as though this young man isn't coming," and as he said it the telephone bell rang. Veronica rose swiftly, too swiftly, and caught the unguarded, appraising expression in her stepfather's eyes and had the horrible feeling that he was wondering how much longer he would have to feed and house her, followed by the lover's fear that the loved one had met with some mishap. But Alan's voice brought swift relief. He sounded apologetic and a little worried.

"Hallo, Verry. Listen, my sweet. We've a crowd of people here, and I simply can't get away. They're all coming on to the hop. I left it a bit late, and Billy can't get away either, so he's arranging for a friend of his to call for

you. D'you mind very much, darling? I know it's beastly, but I seem to have messed the arrangements up all round. Will you forgive me?"

He wasn't coming for her. It was the first time he had ever failed to call for her. But she said lightly, in brave, bright tones, "Of course, Alan. It can't be helped. What is Billy's friend called?"

"Carson. He's a flight lieutenant. Rather crusty, I believe. But he and Billy saved each other's lives or something. He's older than Billy, but they're very great friends. He'll call for you and take you up to the camp. Is that all right, darling?"

"Perfectly."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

She said, laughing, "Oh, Alan, you are impossible. How can I be enthusiastic about this unknown flight lieutenant when I was expecting you?"

"Sweet, I know"—his voice was regretful and sympathetic—"but I'll see you there."

"Yes." She smiled into the receiver at that tone in his voice. Her heart was singing wildly again—everything was all right. "See you then. Good-by, my dear."

"Good-by."

She put the receiver down and went back into the lounge, but slowly now, with that soft shining look about her which Alan invariably aroused . . . a sort of secret, inner happiness. Mr and Mrs Crane glanced up, her mother nervously eager, her stepfather irritably. Mr Crane went silently back to his paper. Veronica wasn't his daughter . . . he supposed he had no business giving advice. But darn it all, she looked to him for her board and keep. He didn't like this long and indefinite sort of engagement. If she'd been his girl he'd have had this young Grierson on

the mat about it eighteen months ago. But Fanny wouldn't let him say anything. "Veronica is so sensitive," she always said. Hmmp . . . sensitive! So much more easily hurt when the crash came.

Mrs Crane picked up her needlework with a sigh of relief. Whatever the result of the telephone conversation, Veronica looked happy. She knew that look of exquisite contentment; she had worn it herself once, long ago. The thought of her first husband came to her, a bright, yet painful thought. Veronica had something so like Timothy about her. That was why she must be happy. An eagle's fledgling, born for swift, eager living. She asked gently, "It was Alan, wasn't it?"

"Yes. His mother has some guests, and he can't get down to call for me. Billy Lennard is sending someone from the camp with a car to fetch me."

"Oh."

Mrs Crane stitched in silence for a moment and then said the thing that had been worrying her all day.

"Oh yes. I met the vicar in the village today. He told me Lady Anna had guests. A Mr and Mrs Cheam from London and their daughter." She paused. "The fruit people, you know."

"Must be worth a fortune," said Mr Crane gruffly.

Cheam. The name entered subtly, with the soft aplomb of wealth. A fortune . . . Cheam . . . there was a Cheam shop in every town in the south of England. The name conjured up the purple bloom of grapes, the golden globes of Jaffa oranges. The name was as familiar as a six-penny store.

"He's trying to tell me Alan's going to jilt me for a multiple-fruit-store heiress," thought Veronica and wanted to giggle; the idea was so absurd. She thought of

Grange Farm with its fifteenth-century cellars and dignified Tudor façade. The Griersons might be farmers, but their name was as old as any in the country. Alan had that about him, a sense of heritage like the distant clank of mail. . . . Alan . . . "Sweet, I know, but I'll see you there. . . ." In less than half an hour she would be with him again, dancing with him, and he would look at the new dress and say softly, "Verry. . . ." Nothing else, but by the look in his eyes she would know that she was beautiful and beloved.

She glanced at the clock again. It was twenty minutes to nine. Where was Billy's friend? Crusty, Alan had called him . . . the crusty Mr Carson . . . her mouth quirked mischievously. She couldn't imagine any friend of the gay and gallant Billy being crusty.

The front-door bell rang, and a moment later the maid was announcing, "Flight Lieutenant Carson."

Veronica rose swiftly to greet the tall man who came through the archway from the hall. He was in mufti, a heavy tweed overcoat, the collar pulled up about his face, a soft felt hat in his hand. He was very tall and would have been handsome but for a curious, forbidding hardness about him. He had none of the essential elegances that a man of his looks and position might be expected to have. His dark bronze hair was cropped very short, as though he found it more convenient that way and didn't care a hang how it looked. He was clean-shaven, a lean hard face, very tanned, so that his eyes, of a curious ice blue, appeared to be even lighter than they were. He had a firm, straight mouth, and an old scar ran down one high, hard cheekbone, giving him a strange forbidding look. Veronica went toward him smilingly, a little disconcerted. She had always thought Alan very tall, but she realized with a little

shock that her dark head barely topped the stranger's broad shoulder.

"How nice of you to do this," she said swiftly. "And you're not going to the dance?"

"No." His smile was swift and rare, a flash of white teeth that brought his bleak face to life. "Billy was in the deuce of a flat spin. Our servant is ill, and he was struggling with his own white tie just as Grierson rang up to ask him to fetch you. I was working actually, but it's only ten minutes from the camp, so I volunteered."

She said, "That was kind of you. But it seems a little unconventional that Billy's superior officer should go around picking up stray members of his party."

He said cynically, "Oh, I'm only his flight commander, not his commanding officer; and you only worry about that sort of thing when you have women attached to you, *off duty!*"

Veronica repressed a smile—obviously a misogynist and fretting to get back to whatever work it was that he had left. He must be very fond of Billy to put himself out like this. She introduced Mr and Mrs Crane, and Mr Crane reluctantly put down his paper to offer Carson a drink.

"Whisky and soda? Sherry—or perhaps you have dined?"

"Nothing, thanks." His voice sounded decisive. "I'd like to get back if Miss Crane doesn't mind being rushed."

"Miss Shale," corrected Veronica swiftly. "Mr Crane is my stepfather."

The ice-blue eyes rested questioningly on hers.

"No relation to Shale, the pilot, I suppose."

"His daughter," said Veronica simply.

Mrs Crane rose to her feet, and her voice was a little tremulous.

"You knew him?" she asked.

He said quickly, with a little bow, bringing his heels together with military precision, "I had that great honor, madam. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Mr Crane watched him a trifle sullenly; he disliked any reference to his brilliant predecessor. Veronica slipped into her evening coat, which Crane held out for her, and picked up her bag.

"I'm ready," she said.

In the car, running up the steep hill toward the camp, she said, "I was still a child when my father was killed. Do you remember him, Mr Carson?"

"Yes. I was very young myself. I went to one of his lectures, and someone introduced me."

"What was he like?" she asked a trifle wistfully. "I can only remember a wonderful person who descended on us occasionally, filling our dull world with laughter and excitement and vanishing into the blue again."

He glanced curiously at the sweet, serious profile beside him. She was like Shale, yet unlike. Michael Carson had set himself a lonely path to tread . . . work, service, duty. He had not wanted to do this for Billy this evening. He had made women alien to his life, this sort of woman particularly. Deliberately he had set them aside. Yet this girl seemed to be traveling along the same road as himself. She seemed strangely and appealingly alone. But he was walking that path deliberately, and she seemed unaware of it, lost there . . . lost as a child is lost, trying to conceal its fear . . . searching hopefully for help and reassurance. He smiled grimly to himself in the darkness. He'd better have kept to his determined loneliness if a chance meeting was to impress him so. He had met her father shortly before he went off on his last fatal flight into the

unknown. She had that look Shale had worn, vividly alive, receptive, with that same exquisite dark beauty that had made the picture papers build him into a public idol. But the likeness had ended there. This girl was subtly sensitive, softly feminine, where Shale had been hard, bright, diamondlike with courage and his eager urge toward adventure.

"He was like you," he said at length and then, for he had a notoriously unconventional habit of speaking his thoughts, "but with a difference . . . the difference between steel and velvet."

She looked up at him, a little surprised, and said smilingly, "Is that a compliment?"

"A rather clumsy one, I'm afraid," he said ruefully.

"I don't think so. According to Billy, you are not in the habit of giving compliments, which makes it rather nice and reassuring. Somehow, though, I'd like to have a little steel in my character tonight," she added a trifle wistfully.

"You never will have," he said with conviction. "It will always be someone else who has to provide the steel."

She laughed, frankly protesting at his seriousness.

"You mean I'm the clinging Victorian type," she said. "I hope you're wrong, Mr Carson. It's very much out of fashion."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You sound as though you regret it."

His head went up with a little irritable movement, as though he were entering into the conversation against his will, as though he would jerk away her question like an irritating fly buzzing about his temples. When he spoke it was with his habitual noncommittal reserve. "I really haven't thought about it. Women are rather out of my line, you know."

He seemed to have closed the conversation as definitely as though he were giving an order to a subordinate. They did not speak again until the car slid past the sentry into the drive of the old Victorian mansion that had once housed an eccentric millionaire but was now the officers' mess.

"I'm sorry you're not coming," said Veronica.

"I can't imagine why," he said dourly.

Veronica couldn't either. She only knew that even in his bleak, disconcerting reserve there was a quality of strength, as though his very presence gave forth a certain vitality. But her words were a mere conventional politeness. She did not care who came if Alan was there. In a moment she would see him; she was not thinking of Michael Carson.

Chapter Two

THE CAR STOPPED at the foot of the wide, shallow stone steps immediately behind a palatial Rolls-Royce. With a murmured apology he leaned in front of her to open the door. She was unconscious of his nearness; her eyes were searching the crowd of arriving guests for Alan.

"Billy said he'd wait for you in the hall," he said. "He should have fixed that tie by now." There was a pause; an airman on duty at the door came to open the car door. Carson said suddenly, as though the words came out before he could prevent them, "If I come tonight will you dance with me?"

She did not reply, and he turned, his keen eyes searching her face with an intent scrutiny, as though he recognized something in her expression, something terrifying which he knew only too well. The chauffeur had opened the door of the car in front, and Alan Grierson had just alighted. He was hatless, handsome and debonair, the light from the open doorway above shining on his smooth brown hair, his

good-looking face alight with laughter as he spoke to someone still inside the car. He was followed by a stout, commonplace, middle-aged man, shinningly well-dressed and valeted, by Lady Anna, a glitter of diamonds and old lace, and another middle-aged woman, her plain face rising from the soft brown gleam of an expensive sable coat, and finally by a girl.

She was about nineteen, blonde and slim, dressed in a close-fitting sheath of silver sequins, pretty as a chocolate-box cover. Alan's hand went out swiftly to help her alight.

Veronica knew she was being absurd. Of course these must be the Cheams, Alan's guests. The girl was lovely . . . lovely. She turned swiftly back to Carson. The cars behind were already hooting for him to take his car away and allow them to draw up to the foot of the steps. Already the Rolls was moving away.

"You haven't answered my question," he said swiftly.

She glanced up at him, startled, confused. She had not heard.

"If I come tonight," he repeated, "will you dance with me?"

"Of course," she said quickly. "After you've been so kind as to bring me here I'm in duty bound to give you as many dances as you please."

"I shouldn't want you to dance with me from a sense of duty," he said stiffly.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She put a contrite and gentle hand on his arm. "That was badly put; I didn't mean it that way. Of course I'd be happy to dance with you."

He smiled, his quick, unexpected, humorous smile. There was a touch of self-mockery in it.

"Don't promise too rashly. I may keep you to that."

The car behind hooted impatiently. She got out, turned

and gave him her hand. "Good-by, Mr Carson, and thank you." Her eyes strayed to the group on the steps. Alan had not seen her yet.

As their hands met she was conscious of the strong, reassuring grip of his fingers, and their eyes met for a moment before she turned away. She blushed painfully. Was she being so obviously, stupidly jealous that he could see she would need all her courage? A fierce, unreasonable resentment rose within her, and for a moment she hated him for reading her heart so easily. He was a stranger, yet if he had not been a stranger she would have been grateful instead of angry for that swift, courage-giving glance and handgrip.

It was Lady Anna who first noticed Veronica and with her usual *savoir-faire* sailed toward her with outstretched arms.

"Why, Verry, darling, there you are. What are you hiding away for—surely you are with us? My dear, what a lovely dress. It's new, isn't it?" Subtly her words contained an indication that a new dress was something of an event in Veronica's life. "Now come and meet Alan's new friends." (*Alan's*—not hers. Veronica did not miss the point, emphasized with Lady Anna's scatterbrained cleverness.) "Mr and Mrs Cheam, Miss Shale . . . Miss Cheam. . . . Veronica and Alan have been friends ever since they were children."

Veronica smiled and said formally, "How do you do?"

Mr and Mrs Cheam murmured conventional greetings, and Alise Cheam gave her a cool, comprehensive glance from her pretty blue eyes. To be so young, Veronica thought, and to have such superb self-confidence . . . this girl had everything she had asked for in life. This plain man and woman had struggled and strived to surround

her with beauty. She must have been born when they were well on in years, and she was like a fairy gift that had been granted them. They had made money, but their money had been of little use to them until Alise had been born.

Veronica glanced swiftly at Alan and was rewarded by his tender, humorous smile which said plainly, "Sorry, darling, but I simply had to look after these people for Mother."

Alise said impatiently, "Listen to the music. I'm longing to dance."

Alan slipped an arm under each girl's elbow, giving Veronica the faintest confidential squeeze, and the three went up the steps together. Billy Lennard, resplendent in his mess uniform, came rushing forward to meet them. He regarded Alise Cheam with definite and open approval while Alan introduced her and her parents.

"Delighted to meet you, Miss Cheam. Hallo, Lady Anna," Billy said gaily. He was a good host, and Veronica thought it was typical that he and Alan should be friends; they both had the same youthful vitality and charm; they were both so good-looking. "Hallo, Verry. Hope old Carson didn't snap your head off. We're sort of bond brothers, you know, since we had a very forced landing together. But he nearly jibbed tonight when I asked him to collect a female."

"Is he a woman hater?"

Billy's glance was eloquent with meaning. "With reason."

"Oh," Veronica said and swiftly, avoiding any personal discussion, "He knew my father."

But Alise cut in imperiously, "Sounds like romance or scandal. Please tell us, Mr Lennard."

He smiled blandly into her pretty face, ignoring her

question. If she was willing to rake up Carson's past tragedy to make five minutes' idle conversation, he was not. "Since Verry and Alan always have the first dance together, Miss Cheam, perhaps——"

His passing over her question was a rebuke, and before he had finished speaking she had turned a bare white shoulder on him and was saying to Alan, "Alan, I'm dying to dance."

It was a command rather than a request. Alan glanced toward Veronica with a tiny, helpless shrug, slipped his arm round the slender silver-clad figure and moved out across the polished floor among the crowd of dancers. Billy's eyebrows went up expressively.

"Well, what d'you know?" He grinned his captivating smile. "Sorry, Verry. Will you have this with me?"

"Just wait until I leave my coat."

He escorted her to the mess serving room, which on open guest nights served for a ladies' cloakroom. She left her velvet coat, glanced at her lips and hair and went out to him. Together they joined the dancers. He looked back at her whimsically. Her cheeks were very bright now, and her long dark lashes hid her dark, inscrutable eyes.

He said, "Don't be upset, Verry. Alan couldn't get out of it. That's a very imperious young lady."

Veronica looked up and gave him her usual frank smile.

"Do I look so very distraught? You're the second person who has considered I need moral support tonight, Billy."

"You look stunning, and that's a marvelous dress," he said. "I didn't think you needed moral support, Verry, but I thought you might *think* you needed it."

"It's much the same thing," she said, laughing, and Alan, dancing near, caught her face in profile, laughing. "But

you must admit she's lovely to look at. And wouldn't you be imperious if you were nineteen and an heiress?"

"Turning the other cheek, huh? There's a difference between being imperious and being bad-mannered. You're too kind, Verry." He held her a little closer. "After all, you're Alan's girl."

Something within her said icily, "I wonder?" and she put the foolish thought away and said mildly, "What else could Alan do? She's his mother's guest."

"Yes, quite." He glanced at her with an odd look of affectionate pity, and just then the music stopped. "How about a little drink?" he said, and they turned toward the bar, now housed in the palm lounge where once Edwardian beauties and Johannesburg millionaires strolled, but before they could leave the dance room Alan claimed her for a dance.

It seemed to Veronica that the whole room was suddenly brighter, and that the dance, after all, was the usual gay, friendly affair it always was. They danced in silence for a while. Alan danced beautifully. As they moved into a sheltered corner he pressed his lips suddenly against her dark, perfumed hair.

"Verry," he said huskily, "thank you, darling."

She gave the tiniest little pressure of her cheek against his.

"For what?" she asked softly.

"For being such a brick."

"You couldn't help it, my sweet."

"No. Mother would have these people down. You know how naughty she can be if she scents any money."

Verry looked at him mischievously.

"Does she want you to marry the lovely Miss Cheam?"

He said a little angrily, "Good God, Verry, surely she knows there is no one for me but you."

Veronica said with suddenly grave lips, "I hope so, sweetheart."

Their eyes met in a look that was a caress. Veronica's heart lifted with love. There was a fineness and arrogance about his looks that always thrilled her. It seemed so unfair, somehow, that some people . . . these Cheams, for instance, should have so much money, while she and Alan had nothing . . . and they needed so little . . . only enough to give them a start. Alise was dancing near them now. It was obvious that she was going to be a great success. Her silver dress, fitting her young body like a glove, her bright fair head with its softly shining curls made her charmingly conspicuous, and, once noticed, she held the eye with her youthful vivacity.

The young officer she was dancing with was obviously already deeply in the toils, but as they passed she smiled invitingly up into Alan's eyes and said lightly, "The next one, my pet?" as though the idea he might not want to dance with her had never occurred to her.

Alan smiled and nodded distantly, and Verry saw his jaw set and laughed her soft, low chuckle of amusement. "Darling, don't look so mad. She's very young and very lovely, and she's obviously had everything she's even vaguely wanted from the cradle up. She just happens to agree with me on who is the most attractive man in the room, that's all. It's very flattering really."

Alan ran a finger round his collar. "She makes one damned conspicuous," he grumbled. "A cheap little go-getter."

Veronica's look mocked him tenderly, so that he

laughed at her with a rueful gleam in his eyes. "Don't make fun of me, Verry. Look, let's slip out of here for a minute. I'm dying to kiss you."

They slipped through the crowded chatter of the bar into the long conservatory, where the fountains tinkled softly and there were a great many palms growing up toward the arched glass roof. In a sheltered corner Alan took her in his arms, his mouth bruising hers with its urgency. When he let her go she was pale and trembling with the swift desire that had flamed through both of them. She looked up at him with startled dark eyes. She had wanted to rouse and allure him but not quite like this.

"What is it, Alan?" she whispered. Her hands touched his crisp brown hair, his fevered cheeks, cool, like flower petals. He caught them against his lips.

"Verry, I want you so."

She put her cheek against his bent head.

"Alan . . . darling. . . ."

He looked up quickly. "Verry, let's run away tonight . . . together . . . and get married. Don't let's tell anyone."

She laughed at him again. "Oh, Alan, if only we could."

"Why can't we?"

"Alan, you're not serious?"

He put a sudden hand across his forehead, as though shutting out the vision of her standing there, the light shining softly on her bare white shoulders and frothing delicacy of her tulle gown.

"No . . . perhaps not. . . ."

She put her arms about him and raised her lips for his kiss, and again his mouth found hers and their pulses raced.

"But soon perhaps, precious," she whispered.

He held her very close for a moment, as though he

would never let her go, and then his arms relaxed. "Love me always, Verry," he said huskily. "Whatever happens, love me always."

The music of a fox trot swept through the room as someone opened the swinging glass door, and they moved apart. He said, "I must go and claim the fruit heiress before she routs me out. She's quite capable of doing so."

As though in answer to his words Alise's silver dress was seen glimmering through the palms, her flushed and spaniel-eyed young officer still in tow. Her pretty young face was white, and her eyes glittered, and quite suddenly Veronica, so sure in that moment of her love, was sorry for her. She was so young . . . she had so much to learn . . . painfully the simple great truth that all the money in the world will not buy heart's love . . . or one real friendship.

"Oh, here you are," she said slowly. "Miss——" She turned toward Veronica with deliberate rudeness. "What did you say your name was?" she asked insolently.

"Shale," said Veronica with a little smile.

"Miss Shale seems to be an adept in the art of sitting out. Have you forgotten we were to dance?"

Alan looked at her moodily. "No," he said.

Alise looked at him uncertainly, and Veronica knew that she was on the verge of an outburst of tears or tantrums, for in spite of her defiant little face her lips quivered childishly. Veronica sighed. This lovely child was obviously out after Alan, and it was going to be very difficult. She touched Alan's coat sleeve and said swiftly, "Alan, you must excuse me; I have this dance booked," and she flew back into the ballroom. Swinging through the heavy door of glass and bronze, she nearly knocked into Michael Carson. He had changed into mess kit. She glanced at the impressive line of miniature medals on the left

breast of his jacket and the two thin bands of rank on the epaulets of his broad, well-balanced shoulders.

"So you changed your mind," she said confusedly. "You decided to come after all."

He looked down at her with a slight smile and said quietly, "Yes."

"Did you come because you thought I needed moral support?" she began angrily, angry with herself for being angry. Telling herself she was behaving as badly as that child in there over Alan, with bad taste and lack of control.

He took her arm in a firm hand, and she was quiet suddenly, as a restive thoroughbred is quiet beneath an understanding hand.

"Put it any way you like," he said. "I've come, and you promised to dance with me."

She realized that he was a man of few and simple words . . . he had no power to flatter or cajole, and if he had he would not do so. In the midst of her dismay and anger that he should have seen her distress so easily was an admission of his curious attraction . . . this lean, purposeful giant of a man with his strange eyes and scarred brown face. But there was about him a barrier of aloofness, beyond which he kept people effortlessly. She could imagine no one could ever be close to his heart. And yet, strangely, he seemed near her, as though he were in curious sympathy with her, a strange, unspoken understanding.

She remembered Billy Lennard's words when she had asked, lightly enough, if Carson were a woman hater. "With good reason." Had he, out of his own remembered pain, noticed her own hurt and humiliation? So she had been as obvious as all that about Alan and Alise. She remembered her stepfather's eyes above his newspaper when

Alan had not called for her, Billy's casual little squeeze of sympathy when Alan had not claimed his customary first dance and now this man's odd attitude of protection. He had not wanted to fetch her; he had been studying and had, under protest, obliged Billy by running down to the village in his car and bringing her to the dance. And yet he had gone back to his room and changed and come to the dance because he had caught a glance of defeat and fear in her eyes; because he had thought, for a moment, that she needed some help he could give. Well, this was the end of all that nonsense. Those few moments with Alan in the conservatory had put her right again. She was secure in her love; she could laugh at them all and herself for her foolish fears now.

She took his arm with mocking graciousness. "It is very sweet of you to take such an interest in me, Mr Carson," she said.

He seemed as if he would answer her light words, but they had reached the door of the ballroom, and he swung her into a waltz. Surprisingly for so tall a man he danced well, if not quite with Alan's finished elegance, with a natural rhythm and swing. The arm about her was curiously satisfying; there was an iron strength about it. It was like being ringed in steel to swing to the waltz music in his arms. In spite of her longing for Alan she enjoyed the dance. Billy Lennard came up to them, bubbling with enjoyment, his good-looking face alight with fun.

"Well, well, well, the old hermit in person," he said facetiously. "Gather round, everyone, and look who's here. Old Mick Carson himself. How 're you doing, Mick? How does it feel to trip the light fantastic after eighty years' retirement? Let me see, it was the year the valeta came out that you went into the old cave, wasn't it?"

Carson smiled his enjoyment of Billy's nonsense.

"It feels fine. How about a drink?"

"The idea's sound. Let's have it outside. Someone's going to send off some fireworks or something."

"In aid of what?" asked a girl.

"Oh, the overseas posting list is out," said the brown-eyed boy who had been dancing with Alise. "Some of these chaps start their leave tomorrow."

"And the mess cat's made a century in kittens," said Billy. "We always have fireworks for a blessed event. Come on."

There was a rush for the long marble terrace overlooking the lawns, and Veronica followed more slowly with Michael Carson. She glanced up at him and wanted passionately to end the misapprehension he had about her.

"Mr Carson," she said suddenly, "did you really come tonight because you thought I looked troubled . . . or afraid?"

He said, "I've only met you tonight, Miss Shale; how could I know such a thing? I know so little about you." She felt absurdly snubbed, and the color rose to her cheeks again.

Out on the terrace the night was still and very dark and chill with the chill of early spring. She walked in silence toward the far end of the terrace, leaving him a little behind. Her cheeks were still burning; she felt hot with shame. He hadn't even thought about it . . . it was just she . . . herself . . . so strung up over this business that she thought everyone could read her unhappiness in her eyes. But it was all right now, thank God. Even if she had made a fool of herself everything was all right now.

There was a noise, a husky sound of tears, so close that

she stopped still, startled, then realized that the sound came from down below out of sight in the darkness, in the covered walk below the terrace. She would have gone back to the gay group, booing the very amateur fireworks that someone was endeavoring to let off on the lawn, but she caught the sound of Alan's voice. She stood quite still, unable to move.

He was saying, "You might have a little more sense than to come seeking me out like that, making a fool of me in front of people I know."

"When you invited us down to Grange Farm you didn't tell me you were engaged," the stormy voice answered. There were tears in it, but not tears of unhappiness, only tears of spoiled temper. Veronica, rooted, frozen on the terrace above, knew that if there had been anything to throw Alise would have pitched it headlong at Alan or across the lawn or anywhere.

His voice was patiently bored. She knew that voice too well. When anyone was annoyed with him, or disappointed, how easily that patient boredom crept into his voice, too tired to go into explanations. "I'm not engaged."

"Well, very definitely attached then."

"Not even that, Alise. Veronica and I have known each other since childhood. We're just very good friends."

Veronica's hand gripped the marble balustrade until her knuckles showed white through the flesh. One of the fireworks unexpectedly burst into stars and amid ironical cheers burst into a ghastly green glare, momentarily lighting her face. She looked wan and weary, drained of all her youth.

The impatient, spoiled, angry voice came to her again.

She did not want to listen; she had heard sufficient. But her feet wouldn't move. She could not move. She stood there helpless, shivering.

"Oh well, I don't care to be treated as you have treated me tonight. You were always following me around the other week in London, sending me flowers, begging me to come out with you and asking me to come down here to meet your mother. And now you think you have me eating out of your hand." The voice was spiteful but sure of its power, its money, its lovely arrogant youth. "Well, you can go to the devil, Mr Alan Grierson—you and your ancient, ancient family and fine connections."

There was a patter of high heels on the stone walk below, as though she had started to go away, but it stopped, and there was a long silence. And then Alan's voice, husky, passionate, "There, you little devil, will that show you I'm mad about you?"

A girl's laugh, contented, flattered, amused . . . cool as a harp stroke across the lawn.

Then Alise's voice, mischievous, triumphant, "Let's go and tell everyone. Let's tell your mother and my people. They'll be thrilled to tears."

"Alise . . . not tonight!" Alan said urgently.

"Afraid—or ashamed of me? If you haven't the courage of your convictions we can easily call it all off."

Veronica turned and began to stumble blindly along the terrace toward the conservatory door, for a moment unable to see, unable to think . . . feeling her way along blindly with groping hands, not knowing where she was going or why, lost, her whole world shattered about her. She felt physically sick and had a dreadful feeling that she would be sick there before everyone on the terrace. Her head throbbed as though two hammers beat in her temples.

Her blindly outstretched hands met another, hard, big, steady as a rock. A voice said curtly, "Snap out of it; people are looking."

She gasped, "I can't. I've got to go—I've got to get away—before——"

"Pull yourself together. I'm with you!"

She felt his hand go under her elbow and grip it and knew that, half supporting her, Michael Carson was taking her along the terrace, past Billy and the gay crowd there, through the crowded bar into the ballroom. Knew that something in the way he gripped her arm made her walk with her head up and her lips firm. Knew that she was making an effort such as she had never made in her life before.

They were playing a fox trot. He slipped his arm about her. "Dance," he said.

"I can't."

"You have to . . . only for a little while. Don't let them tear you to pieces for their Roman holiday."

Mechanically she let him swing her into the rhythm of the dance. The queer sickness wouldn't go. The lights, the music swung unsteadily; her feet did not seem to be touching the ground. Carson's arm, like a steel band, kept her upright; her left hand clutched helplessly onto his shoulder. Why couldn't he let her go? She was beyond caring whether people knew; she was too sick with misery to care about humiliation.

Mistily she saw Alise's silver dress going toward the group in the corner, saw her speaking, holding Alan's arm possessively, saw Lady Anna rise and kiss them both effusively.

"Let me go," she breathed. "Let me go."

"Don't let them see they've hurt you," he said angrily.

As they passed in the dance Lady Anna caught at her tulle skirts and brought them to a standstill. Carson's arm did not drop from her waist; it held her upright, steady.

She was conscious of a ring of faces, most of them a little angry and very sympathetic. She and Alan had a lot of friends among the officers and their wives and daughters. Everyone there knew she was "Alan's girl." Alise seemed as shingly triumphant as her silver gown. Alan did not look at her, not at anyone; he looked bored and irritable, that bored mask of his when things went against him or got out of hand. She had so often kissed it teasingly away.

Lady Anna said delightedly, "Isn't it wonderful, Veronica? These two bad children are engaged."

Something in Veronica melted. Alan was curiously like a bad child, standing there sullenly. He must hate this public underlining of his weakness. He loved to appear gallant and charming. Alan . . .

Someone said, "How nice. I'm sure that they'll be very happy," and it wasn't until she was walking toward the hall, with Carson's arm still round her, that she realized she had spoken. He said gently, "That was brave. Now you can go."

She said, catching at his arm, "Don't leave me."

His keen eyes softened a little. Her fear was so raw, so childlike, and she turned to him as a child turns toward its mother, blindly trusting. He took her hands gently and said with slow insistence, "Get your things and meet me here. I'll take you home."

She stopped at the door of the cloakroom. Before the glass Alise was repairing damages to the red bow of her lips and smoothing her honey-gold hair. The lights glittered on the silver sequins on her dress, robing her in a thousand pin points of light. She glanced up through the

mirror at Veronica's white face and said casually, "Hallo . . . running repairs?"

Veronica shook her head and heard her voice say, "No, I'm going home. I have a headache."

She wanted to cry out to this girl, "You have everything. There isn't anything you cannot have and hardly anybody you cannot have if you wish. The world is at your feet. Why must you take my belief in life away? Why must you choose my love?" But her lips did not move; she, too, bent over the mirror, lightly powdered her face, found her evening coat and slipped it on and went back into the hall where Carson was waiting for her. As she took his proffered arm Alise joined them. Her cool blue eyes flickered approvingly over Michael's tall lithe figure, rose to his stern face and lit challengingly.

"Billy tells me that this is the first dance you have attended at Seadon, Mr Carson," she said prettily.

"Yes," said Michael uncompromisingly.

Veronica knew then that Alise was keeping them there deliberately, and she knew what a fox feels like, cornered by the hounds. She stood silently, helplessly, praying for release, praying just to be allowed to go away and hide. It was torture to stand, her lips frozen into a conventional smile, while Alise stood there, beautiful in her silver gown, her whole triumphant youth saying, "I am invincible. I have taken your man away; I could take this one, too, if I cared." And Veronica's whipped heart saying, "Anything . . . anything . . . only let me go."

"Billy tells me you are a woman hater," Alise said softly. She had been entranced with her new toy all evening; she had flirted, tormented and triumphed, and now she was looking round for someone or something else to amuse her.

Michael's fine, rangy strength and distinguished good looks had not escaped her.

Michael grinned, suddenly, wickedly, a vivid lightening of his stern face. "Not exactly," he said with a charm and point matching her own. "My pet aversion is spoiled little girls."

"Oh!" The blood flamed to Alise's cheeks in mortification. She had asked for it, and quite brutally she had got it. For once she had met someone with whom her charm and her beauty and her wealth cut no ice. Before she had recovered her poise he had come smartly to attention with sardonic precision and bowed his adieus. He took Veronica's arm, and together they made their escape to where his car was parked in the tree-ringed drive.

Chapter Three

NICE TYPE," he remarked grimly as he drove his two-seater toward the main gate. "Pity someone didn't take a hairbrush to her years ago."

Veronica smiled wanly. In the sheltering darkness of the car she had hoped for the relief of tears, but her eyes were dry. She had a feeling that they would always be dry. Later her pride would revive. She would feel humiliated and hurt, but as yet she only knew the searing pain of loss, the bruised ache of despair. She wanted to cry out wildly, "Oh, Alan . . . oh, my love . . . it isn't true . . . it *can't* be true. . . ."

A sentry challenged them and, recognizing Carson, passed them through the white gate, and Michael acknowledged his salute and thanked him as they passed through onto the road. Out of the numbness of her pain Veronica remembered the curt indifference of other officers she had known and was impressed by his grave courtesy. She realized then that was Michael Carson's greatest characteristic

. . . a depth of kindness and consideration beneath his bleak exterior. She sat back in the car in a little huddled heap, glad, somehow, that it was he whom she was with but too numb with misery to care where they went or where he took her.

The white chalky country road rose steeply between the dark fir plantations, which made long black fingers of shadow across the road as the moon rose behind the trees.

Michael drove fast and well, up away from the trees, instead of turning the car toward the village, along a narrow lane that ran into the hills. Always higher until at last they were running along the summit of the hills, and the camp with its myriad lights, the village and the fields of the valley were laid out like a map in the moonlight below. Far away a river glittered like a sleeping silver snake. The night was chill but windless and still, not a branch stirring. When he stopped the car by the roadside and got out Veronica was aware of the listening silence of the countryside. From the airdrome below a flight of machines on night patrol rose like three droning silver bees. The red and green navigation lights became smaller and vanished, and the sound of the engines died away. The silence closed down about them again; the world was very still, very empty, empty as her own frightened heart.

He put out a hand and helped her to alight, and they walked slowly, with an unspoken mutual agreement, toward the grassy edge of the hill. Below them, about thirty yards farther down the slope, a chalk pit, like a huge bite taken out of the hill, gleamed white in the moonlight. They walked down to where a rickety fence guarded its sheer, dangerous edge and stood, leaning on the wooden rail, looking across the valley in silence.

Michael watched her, aware that she was unconscious of

his presence, aware as he had been aware once earlier in the evening how fear and loss carved her soft beauty into a delicate fragility. What devil had possessed Grierson that he could hurt her so brutally, so publicly? She was so vulnerable, so gentle. Why couldn't he have told her honestly of his change of heart. His mouth tightened a little at the thought. People did not; they either did not think or did not care of the wreckage they left behind. But perhaps there had been no change of heart, only the glamour and lure of wealth.

Veronica looked down into the white maw of the chalk pit, fascinated. It was a terrible drop, some seventy feet down to the workings below. It would be so easy to slip under the wooden rail and drop down into the whiteness. It didn't look hard in the moonlight, only soft, a soft diffused whiteness like a great bed. One could drop into it and be in darkness . . . darkness, silence and sleep. . . .

Michael's voice said pityingly, gently, "No, Veronica."

She looked up sharply, distraught, startled.

"I wouldn't let you. And you can't. . . ."

Shocked into defiance, she said bitterly, "Why not?"

"Because you don't know—you don't know whether it really is a way out. Old Shakespeare knew something when he said 'To die, to sleep: To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; For in the sleep of death what dreams may come . . . ?' You don't know; no one does. You might wake up in eternity with your problems unsolved, your heart still broken. People call it 'the coward's way out.' I know nothing about that, but I do know it is not a certain way out." He paused and said slowly and painfully, as though he had never spoken these things to anyone before, "The only way out is to live and to work it out, to fight it and destroy it."

She leaned against the fragile rail, slender as a blowing reed, her tulle skirts stirred by a sudden, vagrant breeze. Sharply she covered her face with her hands and was racked suddenly by tearing dry sobs of despair. He was right; there was no escape. The last two years of her life had been bound up in one thing only, her love for Alan and his love for her. Her life had moved on toward one goal—to be his wife. And now it was finished, over . . . there was no goal to move to . . . nothing.

But the bitterness was that love had not gone. It was still there, agonizingly, in her heart. She felt at this moment that she could not go on through the empty years. It did not seem possible in that dreadful moment of loss that time could ever ease her heartbreak. Michael put out his hand and drew her gently against him, giving her, very simply, the only comfort that could help her; the age-old comfort of mother, lover, friend, of sheltering arms and gentle hands, a breast to weep on. In that moment they were unaware of each other as man and woman. She was a fellow creature in desperate need, and she clung to him desperately, trying to draw herself out of the engulfing depths of her despair.

After a while she was quieter and drew away, drying her eyes, suddenly aware of him, aware that she had been weeping helplessly in his arms . . . a stranger . . . a strange, quiet man whom she hardly knew.

"Why did you bring me up here?" she asked.

He took out his cigarette case and offered her one, but her fingers trembled so that he drew it out for her and lit it before taking one himself.

"I knew. . . . I couldn't let you go back to face ordinary things. You're only at the beginning yet, the personal part." He said, "There's another side yet."

"Another side?"

"People, your parents, your friends, the whispered comments, the maddening, well-meant sympathy. It needs courage to face that. You've got to find some of your courage before you can go back to it."

She said gratefully, humbly, "Why are you so kind to me?"

He turned away; his face was very strange in the moonlight. Stripped of unapproachable aloofness. Aloofness that was a mask between his once bitterly hurt soul and the world.

"It happened to me once . . . just the same."

"Ah, yes." She remembered Billy Lennard's casual words about him being a woman hater. He glanced at her sharply.

"Did you know?"

She shook her head. "No. Billy just hinted that you had a good reason for avoiding women."

"Yes. I owe a lot to Billy. I owe him a terrible debt."

His face was grim, and the scar that ran down the side of his face stood out vividly against his brown hard jaw, as though even the memory that held him burned as that wound had once burned.

She said swiftly, "Please don't tell me if it hurts."

"It doesn't—any more. I have to tell you so you will realize just how much I understand. How much I may be able to help you, want to help you." He paused, then went on: "My chalk pit was the drome a thousand feet below. I'd been drinking heavily and it occurred to me how easy it would be. A split second of fear perhaps; that was all I'd have to face before oblivion and peace. I was with Billy Lennard, giving him blind flying instruction in a dual-control machine. He knew I'd been drinking; he may even have expected something of the sort for he knew about

the whole thing; everyone knew; everyone was gossiping. I let him take the controls and started quite calmly to get out—as though I was going to make a parachute descent. How he stopped me and brought us down I've never known; we piled up, of course; both of us were in hospital." He ran his finger slowly down the scar along his face. "I've this to remind me that I nearly took a young, carefree life with me as well as my own useless one."

They were silent, then Veronica said, low-voiced, "Thank you; it was kind—and brave—of you to tell me."

Silently they turned and walked back to the car. She was dry-eyed now. She said quickly, "Does it ever hurt—about her, I mean?"

He smiled, his slow, attractive smile. "No, but a thing like that changes you, your whole life. That's why I want you to try so hard. For if bitterness gets you you're never really young again. You've to grasp your courage in both hands."

Never really young again, that was how she felt! Old, weary. She stood at the door of the car and turned to him, crying, "But I have nothing; I have no one to help me!"

"For what it's worth you have my friendship," he said quietly.

He drove her back home, and she let herself into the silent house. She was going quietly across the hall when she saw her mother standing in the drawing-room door. Quite suddenly she saw what he meant: people! She braced herself to meet the timid, kindly inquiry in her mother's eyes.

"I just thought I'd wait up for you, dear," Mrs Crane said in a low voice. "Did you have a nice time?"

Veronica said in a clear brittle voice, "No. Oh, Mother,

I want you to know before anyone else. It's all over between Alan and I."

"Oh, my poor——"

"Now, darling, please don't fuss and don't be sorry for me. I'm quite all right really. Now let's go to bed before Father hears us."

"But——"

"Darling, please."

She went upstairs to her room, took off her dress, throwing it aside, and presently she lay awake in the darkness. "Take your courage in both hands." Oh, but it was hard. A hundred tender little memories came back to her, a hundred kisses, plans and promises. The things they were going to do together, the places they would go to, all the little lovely things of love that are so bittersweet to look back upon. Take your courage in both hands, ah, but here in the darkness she could admit defeat; she could cry and no one would know and care.

She slept a little, troubled, dream-filled sleep, and woke early with a sense of emptiness and foreboding, hating to go down to face her mother's sympathy and her stepfather's justified triumph. Oh, he would be kind; he would not mention it to her, but to everyone else he would remark that all along he had known this would happen. She took particular care of her appearance, adding a little extra rouge, putting on a gay, bright jumper with her conventional tweed skirt.

At breakfast Mr and Mrs Crane talked with a bright, forced cheerfulness about everything but Alan, so that presently she said with bitter humor, "Mother, don't sheer round the subject as though Alan was the dear departed, not to be mentioned. If I stay in Seadon, and as I haven't the means to leave or the ability to earn my living

elsewhere I've got to stay, I'm likely to see him every day. You can't help it in a place this size. It's not the slightest use pretending he doesn't exist." She rose from the table, leaving them a little startled and bewildered at the misfiring of their attempted tact.

Veronica closed the door behind her and leaned against it. If it were not for this awful bruised sense of weakness—why should anybody be interested?—people were jilted every day! She had to go on. She had no planes to fly, no hard, grueling work to do. She must go into the kitchen, arrange the day's menu, go shopping, take the dog out, face the barrage of sympathy of the village street. Everyone would know, everyone always did. Gossip ran round the village as though on wires.

In the kitchen Edie was whispering confidentially through the window with the milkman.

"Engaged to that Miss Cheam," he was saying eagerly. "They say her dad's a millionaire. I always thought he was hooked up to your young lady."

"So he is," Edie whispered indignantly. "I thought she looked bad at breakfast. Ought to be horsewhipped, he did if it's true." She caught sight of Veronica standing there and went on authoritatively, "Two pints, please; shall we need any cream today, Miss Veronica?"

Veronica smiled and restrained an impulse to laugh—laugh with wild hysterical amusement. People, he had said. Were they all talking like this, everywhere? Did everyone know that Alan had thrown her over, the tradesmen, the laborers, everyone in the village. She pulled herself together with an effort, went through the day's menu with Edie and went out of the kitchen. As she went through the hall there was a ring at the doorbell, and she opened it herself. Michael Carson turned to greet her. He was in

mufti, which was unusual for that time of day, and his small car, standing at the curb was piled with luggage.

"Forgive me for calling so early; I wanted to see you before I left."

He followed her into the drawing room, a big, masculine figure among her mother's jittery "occasional" furniture and bric-a-brac. He went to the window and looked out at the sleepy industry of the village street.

"You are going away?"

"Yes, draft leave. The usual twenty-eight days. You see I'm due for overseas posting." He paused a little uncertainly, and she felt he was not uncertain of himself but, somehow, of her. "I didn't tell you last night; I've known for some while now, of course. That's what I wanted to see you about."

She repeated foolishly, "See me about?"

She felt queerly frightened and wondered if she could have faced this morning had she known he was going away. Last night they had met as strangers in this room, but to-day somehow they had need of each other. She had desperate need of him, of his proffered friendship. He went across to her, holding her eyes with that clear, penetrating look of his.

"You'd like to go away too?" he said.

"Yes." She laughed a little bitterly. "I'd like to go away." She glanced at him, the color coming to her cheeks. "You were right about—*people*. But that's impossible."

"Why not come with me?"

She stared at him, pale, uncomprehending, and he said gently, "As my wife."

Chapter Four

VERONICA'S FIRST REACTION was one of stunned surprise. She sat silently, quite still, looking up into his face, conscious of the hurried ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, the dust motes dancing in the golden sunshine.

He was offering her escape; why? Because he was sorry for her? There could be no other reason. She thought with sudden gratitude of his arm ringing her protectively, yet there was something else, something she did not understand. It could not be that he cared for her; it did not happen like this, she knew—she knew only too well the ecstasy, the pain of loving. Yet, unasked, he was offering her his name, his life as a shield.

She could not doubt his sincerity; in the short hours of their acquaintance they had learned too much of each other to be anything but sincere. He stood before her, waiting for her to speak; his eyes, the clear blue of blue sea water in his bronzed face, had lost their icy reserve. He had spoken from his heart. *As his wife, to go with him as*

his wife. She covered her face sharply with her hands, the tears suddenly filling her eyes. Since last night everything had gone awry; all her values and standards were changed. Perhaps it was the people who were nearest to one's heart who were really the strangers. One loved them too much to know anything about them. Alan had been the nearest. No one had ever been, could ever be nearer or dearer, and yet he had destroyed her, cruelly casting her out, publicly stripping her of her pride, and it was as though Michael, whom she scarcely knew, was picking up and clumsily but gently endeavoring to repair the shattered pieces of her life.

"Why do you do this?" she murmured brokenly.

He dropped down on the chesterfield beside her, and for the first time she was vividly conscious of his nearness, even though he did not attempt to take her hand. Last night when she had wept in his arms she had been unaware of him as a person—now she was aware—the still strength of him, the sunlight glinting on the tiny, almost invisible hairs on the back of his well-shaped, masculine hands.

"I want to help you."

She rose and went to the window, looking out onto the sunny prospect of the sleepy village street. Pigeons sunned themselves on the red roofs opposite. A horse and cart passed with a noisily jingling harness. Two neighbors of her mother's with terriers on leash and morning shopping baskets on their arms were talking not far away, glancing confidentially up at the house. She turned round and said harshly:

"Why should you want to make such a bad bargain, Michael Carson? You don't love me; I don't love you. I've no heart left to love anyone with. What is there in it for you?" She tried to smile, but her lips quivered pitifully,

and his heart ached for her. Lost child that he wanted to care for . . . He couldn't tell her that—she would not understand. "It's not so easy as stopping from jumping down a chalk pit," she said painfully. "Marriage is a pretty serious business—you see, I've nothing to give you."

He rose and came to her side, putting his finger under her chin, raising her face so that her eyes met his. The blood rose to her cheeks as he forced her to meet his glance, that penetrating look. It seemed to see right down into her, seemed to see the chaos of hurt pride, of humiliation, the waste of broken love. His hand fell to his side again.

"I don't want or expect anything that you feel you cannot give me." There was a pause, and he said steadily, "You understand?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely audible. "Thank you for that." She turned away and then broke out passionately, "Then why—why—why?"

"You asked what there is in it for me?" He shrugged ironically. "What is there in my life now? What is left in yours? We're in an odd position, you and I, Veronica, down to rock bottom! We've both been stripped pretty brutally of the charming illusions of life." There was a hint of repressed emotion about him, as though it was difficult for him to say these things, to say anything that brought back memories of that bitter past. "Don't you think, Veronica, that we might try to build something out of it together?"

"What can we build?" she cried. "How can we begin? Aren't we both—pretty bankrupt?"

"Not if we have courage," he said swiftly. Something in his tone steadied her, forced her to listen. "Nothing can beat you if you have courage, and I have courage for both

of us now. I'm long past that first phase when every whisper and every glance is a pinprick of humiliation. If I can only help you past that then we can begin to build."

"If only we could; if only we could," she whispered.

He gripped her shoulders and she felt the vital strength of his fingers; she remembered how last night his courage and inflexible purpose had helped her up, forcing her to walk among the people she knew with her head up and her lips firm. He had saved her pride then; he had not allowed her to show the world her heartbreak; he had brought her back from the edge of despair. Had he it in him to send her through life like that? Could she, with Michael Carson beside her, build at least a valiant façade to show the world?

He answered her hesitant thoughts.

"*We can, and we will, Veronica!*"

The grip on her arms, the reckless appeal in his eyes lit a swift response within her, a flaming torch thrust into the darkness which surrounded her, a banner for her to follow valiantly. His passionate eagerness, his belief in the future they might build called on her to respond, to say yes—every impulse urged her toward him. "You don't know him," she told herself; "he's a stranger. This is *marriage* he's talking of. It's crazy; it's madness; how can you find happiness?" And her beaten heart cried back desperately, "It is not happiness I'm looking for; I don't expect miracles; it is escape."

He said with unexpected gentleness, "Say yes, Veronica."

Her lips echoed soundlessly, "Yes, Michael, we can—try," and her heart panicked at what she had done. She would have refuted it, but in some strange way it was no longer in her power. It was as though she had given her

life into his keeping and it was no longer hers to control. She relaxed with a little sigh, leaning her forehead weakly against him.

"You're a very forceful person," she said shakily.

Again that reassuring grip of his hands on her shoulders, that grip that somehow would not permit her to be afraid. Gently he put her away from him. "You'll never regret this, Veronica; I'll never let you regret it."

They were silent for a little while. Veronica went over to the fireplace and opened a cigarette box with trembling fingers, found and lit a cigarette. In the gilt-framed mirror over the mantelpiece she saw her reflection and thought how different she looked. The soft acquiescence that was so much part of her character had vanished for the moment, as though Michael had infused her with some of his own strength and purpose. For the last two years she had been drifting in a lotus land of love, and she had been awakened rudely—to make this reckless, crazy decision. Perhaps it was some streak of heredity; she thought of her father flying into the unknown; now she was doing the same. It was done now. She had promised to become Michael Carson's wife. She repeated the phrase over to herself, "Michael Carson's wife," as though the words held no meaning for her. She fought for composure, for her grip upon herself, and said, with an attempt at irony:

"And now—what now?"

"Yes," he said, "we've got to plan. I'll be stationed in Egypt, and I have twenty-eight days' leave; we'll be married right away, and you can come with me."

"Egypt," she repeated slowly; "it seems so utterly fantastic. If anyone had told me, even an hour ago, that I should go to live in Egypt I should have told them it was impossible. I can't believe it's true. It is like being in the

Arabian Nights with magic carpets and geniis to transport one from place to place."

"I'm afraid it 'll be much more prosaic than that," he said smilingly, "unless—unless we could be married within the next week. Could we, Veronica? Could you be ready in a week? Then we could take the rest of my leave for a—a wedding trip."

She noticed how he avoided the word honeymoon, a word for married lovers, not for two lost souls.

"A week?" She looked at him fearfully. It seemed such a terribly short while. A week. . . . Suddenly she thought of Alan, of how she had waited, planned and hoped—"in the spring perhaps, next year perhaps"—and now within a week she was to marry another man. She thought of his strange sudden wish to carry her off last night; she had laughed; she had not taken it seriously; perhaps that had been his last, desperate bid to do what he really wanted—to follow his heart. Oh, why hadn't she said yes then? Why hadn't he made her say yes, even as Michael had made her say yes today? A storm of protest clamored within her for utterance; she had a moment of sheer panic. She would have told him it was all crazy, have asked him to release her if Mrs Crane, with an apologetic cough of warning, had not come into the room.

She looked at Michael curiously and a little diffidently, for her conventional soul was a little put-out at having a caller at half-past ten in the morning.

"Good morning, Mr Carson," she said with the merest hint of reproof. "You are an early bird. Are you off on leave or something?"

"Yes, draft leave. I'm due for overscas posting—Egypt." He hesitated, then looked inquiringly across at Veronica and, before she could realize his intention,

plunged on: "Mrs Crane, there is something I—that is, Veronica and I—have to tell you—we're engaged to be married."

If he had announced the end of the world Mrs Crane could not have been more astonished; her mind refused to accept his statement—why, Veronica had only met the man last night. She dragged her disbelieving glance from Michael to Veronica, as though only from her lips would she believe such incredible news.

Veronica said swiftly, "Yes, Mother, it's true."

It was true; she stood between them, a wonderful expression stealing over her face. She had thought that Alan had thrown Veronica over for this wealthy Cheam girl. In her heart she knew this was true, but her mind told her that it was Veronica who had broken it off, Veronica who had suddenly become attracted to this handsome officer, so romantic. Poor Alan, she could hear herself talking to the Ladies' Sewing Committee. She thought of all the petty humiliations and well-meant sympathy she had steeled herself to meet, and a little laugh that was very nearly a sob of relief came to her lips.

"Oh, my dear," she said, her hands fluttering affectionately first to Veronica, then a little nervously to Michael, "how wonderful! I am so glad for you—*poor Alan*. It's all so sudden I feel quite dizzy; you are a naughty girl; you really are. I don't know what your stepfather will say."

"We're going to be married right away," said Michael gently, as though he thought it best that Mrs Crane should experience all the shocks that were coming to her at once and get them over. "By special license. We will be living abroad for two years at least."

"Abroad . . . ?" Mrs Crane spoke a little doubtfully, as

though she wasn't quite sure she had heard correctly. Indeed, she wasn't really sure of anything, only that Veronica had been spared the humiliation of being jilted.

"Yes, Egypt—I told you I was going to Egypt. Well, I'd like Veronica to come with me," he explained to her patiently. "It'll be interesting for her; I think she'll like it. I was wondering if you could both come up to town tomorrow; you'll have a lot of shopping to do. If you and Mrs Crane could come up for a few days we could make all our plans. How would you like to motor through France to Marseilles? We might get a few days on the Riviera before we leave for Alexandria."

Like one in a dream Veronica found herself agreeing to spend four days in town, that they should be married in seven days' time by special license at the village church (he would call and see the vicar before he left this morning). He would book rooms for herself and her mother at a hotel in town and meet them tomorrow at Baker Street. It was extraordinarily pleasant, in her present, unhappy state of mind, to surrender herself into capable hands and have her life planned for her.

They went to the door to see Michael off. There were several people in the village street who glanced at the little group with idle curiosity. Veronica saw Miss Penner, the vicar's sister, pause negligently before the butcher's, peering into the reflection of the street in the plate-glass window; above the net curtains of the shop parlor agitated violently with two peering heads. Michael raised his hat, put his arm round Veronica's shoulders and kissed her swiftly full on the lips. His eyes met hers with a little twinkle of amusement. She went pale, then the color ran up her cheeks. The touch of his lips had roused an unex-

pected emotion. She smiled at him gratefully for his *beau geste*. He, too, had seen those bobbing heads and knew the story of that kiss would be all round the village before lunch time. He shook Mrs Crane's hand, climbed into his small, fast two-seater and drove away.

Veronica went back into the house with her mother. As the door closed behind them Mrs Crane turned on her, a rush of questions bubbling on her lips, demanding confidences and explanations. She was disappointed, for Veronica merely murmured something noncommittal about there being "nothing much to tell," and with the excuse of "seeing about some things for tomorrow" she escaped and went upstairs to her room.

She wanted to be alone; she wanted to try and think clearly about this strange, unexpected, final step she had taken. Try to, but it was difficult—at the moment, considered calmly, it seemed no saner than if she had followed her momentary impulse of the evening before and slipped to oblivion down the chalk pit. She went across to the deep padded window seat and looked out at the High Street, its morning shoppers, its tradespeople . . . the windows glinting under the gabled eaves like bright, inquisitive eyes.

"Well—now what have you got to say?" she murmured defiantly. "Now you *have* got something to talk about!"

In her heart there was no defiance; she felt unsure, unhappy. As though Michael's very presence steeled her and when he was gone all the doubt and fear came back again. She wished, foolishly, that she could tell her mother everything. She wanted someone else, not herself, not Michael, to tell her that this was the right thing to do. What *was* she going to do? She was going to marry a man she did not love. It sounded terrible, put bluntly like that. Yesterday, under the spell of her love for Alan, she would have said

that for her such a thing was impossible. Love, young love, knows little of friendship; it is a thing of instinct, impulse, passion, so much to do with the pure fire of touch—lips, arms, hands, the ecstasy of being near the loved one. Well, she was shutting all that out of her life. No more ecstasy for her now, but Michael did not want that or rather did not expect it. Supposing Michael should be in love with her—should want her like that? How should she feel then? An odd little shiver passed over her; she did not know. A little afraid perhaps but somehow proud. Michael had a quality of fineness about him that made one proud of his interest—surely no woman could help being proud of having his love, even though he were not the lover she longed for. Michael as a lover. Her mind could not picture him; she knew so little of him, except that always he would be tender, considerate and kind.

What did he intend making out of their two lives, this strange man? She had a feeling of being helpless, clay in his hands, being molded to his purpose. And just now she was beyond caring. She only wanted to get away, to get away from this place, to get away from herself. Every familiar corner, every stone, every tree reminded her of Alan. A car passing in the street made her heart beat, forgetting, wondering if he had come for her, the sound of horses' hoofs made her start toward the window in eager anticipation. And then the memory would come, black, overwhelming, shattering. It was finished, all over.

Curious that it didn't hurt so terribly when Michael was there. As though he could control even her memory, as though he would not let anything hurt her. By sheer force of his will he would not let her give in to the pain that had nearly destroyed her last night. She thought of that night with an uncontrollable shudder of horror. He

had certainly saved her life, saved it for what? For an empty ache of longing? And yet there was his queer, logical argument: "You might wake up in eternity with your problems unsolved, your heart still broken." Well, he knew. One could not throw despairingly at him, "How can *you* understand?" He understood only too well; he had been through the same fires himself; that was why he was the only one who could help her. Because he *knew*!

There was the clattering noise of hoofs in the street outside, and instinctively Veronica turned and looked down over the spotted muslin blind. The color beat hotly in her face, and her throat constricted, as though a hand had closed upon it. Alan and Alise were riding down the street toward the Grange, evidently returning from a morning canter. Veronica could not turn away; even as last night she had listened helplessly to her own betrayal she could not turn away from the window. "It's not true; it's not true! This can't have happened to Alan and me!"

Alise looked really lovely, like an advertisement displaying what the really smart young horsewoman should wear. It was a pity that her seat and her handling of her mount did not justify the excessive smartness of her well-tailored outfit. She was riding Ladybird, the mare Alan had always let Veronica ride, a lovely bay, temperamental and excitable. Alise's pretty face was red as she tried to control the nervous creature through the midmorning village traffic. Just as they passed an army lorry came by, and Ladybird danced her protest, nearly backing into the butcher's window. Alan rode forward, caught the rein and led Alise back into the road. He glanced up as he passed and met Veronica's eyes, almost as though he expected to see her there. An odd little expression came into his face, shamefaced, ironical, mocking at himself and

Alise, as though he shared some kind of secret with Veronica.

Veronica swung away from the window furiously, angry with him, angry with herself for being caught watching them and because of the stupid, uncontrollable little lilt of hope that glance raised within her. Her dark eyes were bright with disgust. What sort of a man had she given her heart to? Last night he had said Alise was a cheap little go-getter, and now that mocking glance, deriding Alise in her fine riding clothes and her incompetence with her horse, the glance that said, "Look at her, Veronica; *you* wouldn't do this, Veronica."

It was horrible. It would have been better if he had come to her and told her he adored Alise. She could have borne that; she could at least have understood it. But she knew he didn't love Alise; she knew it, and that made it worse, made it shameful. And that look, so intimate, for her alone, made her somehow a party to it all. As though Alan felt at some time quite soon they would meet again and things would be just the same between them in spite of Alise. Her cheeks burned with anger; her eyes felt bright and hot and dry. Not content with what he had done, Alan was gnawing away her love for him, pulling it down bit by bit, horribly soon she would not have the right to say, "He was worth loving, worth even the pain of losing him." And in spite of all this she could not help her heart saying, "He really belongs to me; he really belongs to me. It is only the money; but for the money it would never have happened."

She was ashamed of the thought, but she could not help it. Love was like that. It does not seek, fortunately for some of us, perfection in the beloved. One does not love logically, for a reason, but just because one loves. But with

the lilt of hope that had arisen within her at that glance from him was a sort of horror. She felt contaminated. For the first time she did not want to love him.

She was suddenly grateful that she was going away from Seadon tomorrow. It would give her breathing space, enable her to see things in their proper perspective. Quite suddenly she needed Michael as completely as she had needed him that night on the edge of the chalk pit, his strength, his lack of pretense, his clean, direct honesty. She wanted to go to him and say simply, "Help me, care for me," knowing that in his strength she, too, could be strong.

At lunch time there was a discussion on funds, and Mr Crane, bewildered but so obviously delighted that someone had at last "put one over on that conceited young Grierson," offered quite a substantial check toward her trousseau. Veronica found relief in sinking herself into this discussion on clothes. It was safe; it was unimportant, and it kept Mrs Crane away from other topics. She knew the conventional heartbroken heroine is apathetic, self-absorbed, but she seized greedily on the subject of summer frocks, linen suits, evening dresses. . . . "You'll need at least ten evening dresses," declared Mrs Crane eagerly.

Veronica found herself going through the rest of the day, packing for her mother and herself, attending to her household tasks, planning with Edie for the management of the house while they were away and all the time repeating absurdly to herself, "Ten evening dresses—at least ten evening dresses." Then, "Yes, I'll have a blue chiffon and a black chiffon, and I'll have one of silver sequins——" And she broke off with a sudden brittle laugh. Silver sequins—Alise had looked exquisite in silver sequins. Silver sequins were for very fair, very self-confident

young women, not for her. She pulled her thoughts together; she was letting her nerves run away with her.

She had finished their packing before dinner and changed into a simple afternoon dress. Just as she was finishing her hair the doorbell rang. She stood before the mirror motionless, her heart suddenly clamoring in her throat. It was at this hour that Alan often dropped in for a drink and a chat, but it couldn't be Alan. He surely wouldn't have come tonight.

She heard footsteps up the stairs and along the passage outside, and Edie knocked and put her head round the door, her eyes round with excitement.

"It's—Mr Grierson, Miss Veronica."

Chapter Five

VERONICA stood like a statue, her face drained of all its color, expressionless, stood with the comb posed above her dark hair. Her dress was black, and she had fastened a white carnation just under her throat. To Edie, staring with eager, inquisitive eyes, her pure, still profile seemed as white as the paper-white flower.

"Tell Mr Grierson I'm out."

Edie protested.

"But I've already shown him into the drawing room, miss."

"Tell him I'm out."

The words were ice cold, sharply commanding. Veronica had never spoken to Edie like that before. Startled, her eyes rounder than ever, she hurried away. Veronica stood motionless, listening, until she heard the sound of the front door closing, then she relaxed with a little drawn sigh. Her head was throbbing again, her heart racing like the heart of some trapped, terrified thing. How could he

come here like that, at his usual time, just as though nothing had happened between them?

She finished smoothing her hair and examined her reflection disparagingly. She looked thin and white, too bright-eyed, too strung up; she hoped no one would remark upon it. The strain of the last hours was beginning to tell on her. She had a feeling that she really couldn't stand much more. She went downstairs into the drawing room. There was a small fire, although the early spring weather was warm and sunny. The heavy velvet curtains were drawn, making the room rather close. Mrs Crane was apt to overdo her liking for "coziness." The room was empty; no one but Veronica had finished dressing.

She set the glasses out—Mr and Mrs Crane liked a glass of sherry before dinner, and she always poured it out for them. The intolerable stuffiness of the room suddenly became too much for her, and she drew back one of the curtains to open the window. Alan was standing between the curtain and the window, still in his riding things, white-faced, looking down at her with feverish eyes. She stood back, a little exclamation rising to her lips.

"Forgive me, Verry," he said. "I simply had to see you."

"Why have you come?" she said dully. "Aren't things bad enough? Why can't you leave me alone?"

She hung onto her resistance and self-control. He was so infinitely dear, dear and familiar. All the little, loved things. The way his hair waved from his forehead, crisply, catching the light, the little wrinkles that laughter had left at the corners of his blue eyes. Blue eyes—Michael had blue eyes, too—not half-veiled by long straight lashes like Alan's, but clear, cool, amused. She raised her face and met his eyes squarely.

"Why wouldn't you see me?" he demanded.

"You know why, Alan," she said.

"Verry," he said swiftly, "when I came back this afternoon the mater told me that she had heard you were engaged. To Carson. It's not true, is it, Verry? You only met him last night. I told her she was crazy—it can't be true."

"What right have you to ask?" she said coldly.

"This——"

Recklessly he took her in his arms, his lips finding her with passionate possession. She made no protest; she remained still, unresponsive as a statue in his arms. Irrked by her indifference, he thrust her away, his eyes raking her white, averted face; her eyes were lowered, the long dark lashes casting pointed shadows on her pale cheeks.

"Is it true?"

"Perfectly true."

His eyes blazed with anger.

"You ask what right I have; I have every right. I love you, and you love me; you are doing this out of pique to show everyone you don't care."

She raised her eyes then and said quietly:

"Alan, do you or don't you love Alise Cheam? Are you going to marry her?"

He changed color a little, thrusting his hands down into the pockets of his riding breeches, scowling arrogantly. He was very handsome, like a young angry king. Veronica's lips folded, crushing down the sudden pain within her. She had seen him look like this so often before, scowling, boyish, irresistibly good-looking. She turned and stood behind her stepfather's big Queen Anne armchair, and he knelt within it, so that his face was level with hers. He reached out suddenly and took her unresponsive hands. He seemed very young as he gazed at her with pleading

eyes. She thought suddenly how everything he did was graceful and charming, too graceful, too charming.

"Listen, Verry, I'm in a hole. We're absolutely finished, the mater and I. Credit gone, money gone, everything; we've got to do something." He met her even glance, darkly questioning, clear as a child's, and his own eyes fell irritably before it. "Don't look at me like that, Verry. You don't understand; it's all right for you. Your people may only have a small income, but it's steady and reliable, and you've nothing to keep up, no stables, not much entertaining. It's different at the Grange; farming doesn't pay these days."

"Farming?" she repeated gently.

He rose then, letting go her hands angrily, and that cold boredom which descended upon him when his wishes were thwarted came into his eyes. Once it had had power, that look, to bring Verry, appealing and apologetic, into his arms, but now she stood quite aloof, as though she were observing his actions with cool curiosity. It was as though she were watching a well-loved and familiar landscape and had discovered, surprisingly, that it was only a stage-set, with tricks of light and painted scenery, put on mechanically to serve a purpose.

Her soft dark eyes irritated him tonight.

"Don't *look* at me like that," he flung at her again. "Perhaps we have been extravagant, the mater and I, but we were both brought up like that. It isn't our fault. We can't help it if these things mean a lot to us."

"What things, Alan?"

"Oh, good horses, pleasant living, money to spend. It's what we've always lived among, what we've grown to expect from life."

"Well, you'll never have to do without them now,

Alan," she said quietly. "You're going to marry Alise Cheam, and she, or I suppose her father, will provide these things you can't do without."

He stared at her. He did not know this Veronica. His Verry had been a warm, impulsive thing, championing him against the world, adoring him, accepting him unquestioningly; everything he had done had been right for her. He did not know this Veronica who stood very still and pale, her dark eyes glittering with unshed tears beneath their thick, starry lashes. She was deuced attractive; there was something about her now that gave an added fire to her dark beauty. She was a woman now, not an adoring girl. If only she had been like this last night, if she had had the decision and courage to say yes to his crazy, quickly crushed impulse to carry her off there and then and marry her. But she had not believed him; he had prevaricated too long.

He said defensively, "That announcement last night was premature. Nothing is decided yet; Alise is impulsive."

"Can you tell me that you're not going to marry her?"

"I don't think you understand, Verry."

She said with a sudden break in her voice, "Indeed I do—only too well."

He came across to her then swiftly, catching her up against him. "And if it is true," he said passionately, "what does it matter to us? Does it make any difference? Can it stop us loving each other, Verry?"

She stood gazing at him, white-faced, unbelieving. It couldn't be Alan who had said that to her! The color crept up her face, staining her cheeks with a brilliant, hurt flush. She did not move; she could not. That he should have thought of her in that way! Her lips moved, soundlessly at

first, then framing the words with difficulty, "Please go."

He held her closer, trying to regain his old power over her senses, trying to force her by his nearness to response, to acquiescence. "Please try to understand, Verry, whatever may happen, we love each other. Why should I give you up? It's—it's a business proposition, Verry. I've something to sell—an old name and Alise wants to buy it. But that has nothing to do with us—Verry—I'd do anything for you."

"Except," she said bitterly, "make me your wife."

"I love you, Verry."

She repeated the word, "love," as though it held no further meaning for her and then again, dully, "Please go."

"Verry——"

There was a sound in the hall, and he let his arms drop from her abruptly. She stumbled a little as he did so, suddenly possessed by a dreadful weakness. Mr Crane appeared in the archway leading to the hall. He glanced from one to the other, from Veronica's white face to the feverish desperation in Alan's eyes.

He said, bristling aggressively, "Well, Grierson . . . ?" and Veronica had a dreadful feeling he was going to make a scene. To give Alan that piece of his mind that had been trembling on his tongue for the last two years. She said swiftly, "Mr Grierson is just going," and rang quickly for Edie to show Alan out.

He paused irresolutely; usually he had some charming impudence with which to annoy Mr Crane, but tonight he was at a loss for words. Everything seemed said.

"Good night, sir," he paused, then said, "Good night, Veronica."

"Good-by." She did not look up at him or move until

she heard the front door close behind him, then she went out into the hall with swift, angry steps and stopped the shamefaced Edie.

"Why didn't you do as you were told and tell Mr Grierson I was out?"

Edie blushed and looked tearful. "Oh, Miss Veronica, he seemed that upset, and he said you wouldn't mind. He has such a way with him. I thought——"

The faintest smile curled Veronica's frozen lips. Edie thought that perhaps there was nothing in it all, local gossip following a lover's tiff. She had thought she was doing the right thing, giving them a chance to "make it up." How clever of Alan to play the penitent lover, to get her to bang the front door so Veronica should think he had gone. She wondered bitterly if a kiss had been part of Edie's fee for this connivance and hated herself for thinking so, making the whole thing even more sordid than it was. Michael's words came back to her. "If bitterness gets you you're never really young again," he had said. "Try to take your courage in both hands."

She was being bitter; tonight for the first time her pain was forming into thin whorls of hate within her. She was hating Alan for what he had done to her, for holding her so cheaply, for the way in which he had thought he could keep her, for thinking he could keep Alise's money and her, Veronica's, love. What had she done that he should think of her so? She mustn't hate him; she mustn't give herself up to bitterness. She said quietly to Edie, controlling herself with an effort, "I am not in to Mr Grierson in future, not on any count. Please remember. . . ."

"Yes, miss." Edie, rebuked, went back into the kitchen, and Mrs Crane came downstairs and she and Veronica went into the drawing room together. Veronica poured

out the sherry, as she always did every night. She spoke casually of local things, of their trip up to town tomorrow. She was well aware that everyone in the house was dying with curiosity as to what had passed between her and Alan. People again, even one's own people it seemed.

They went into dinner; it was dignified by the name of dinner though the midday joint appeared, either with salad or disguised as shepherd's pie, with unfailing regularity. Her mother went back again to the safe subject of clothes.

"I always think when you have a limited amount to spend it is best to go to a big store and put yourself entirely in their hands. Tell them you are going out East and rely upon their advice."

Clothes again. The mocking refrain crept back into her mind. Ten evening dresses, one blue chiffon, one black chiffon, one of silver sequins. Sequins like tiny silver coins, like all the wealth in the world hung about one slim young body.

"What are you going to be married in, darling?" her mother asked. "I think for such a quiet wedding white and a veil is perhaps a little unsuitable. Have you thought about it?"

"A silver sequin dress," said Veronica suddenly.

"My dear," said Mrs Crane gravely, "that would be quite unsuitable."

Veronica looked up, and suddenly she began to laugh; she laughed until the tears came to drown the laughter. It was so funny, somehow, that one should spend two years of one's life adoringly centered on one person, only to find there was nothing there. Just a charming, gallant façade like the frontage of a graceful, empty old house. You peered through the windows and found the rooms

burned out, the roofs open to the sky, nothing behind. No sincerity, no honesty, no real love, nothing but desire, selfish, shallow, base. It left one with a curious sense of unreality, as though one would never believe in anything or anybody again.

Her mother rose anxiously.

"My dear, don't give way like this." She glanced anxiously at the door. "Eddie might hear; it looks so bad. Pull yourself together."

"She's hysterical," said Mr Crane irritably. "That young pup, coming here, upsetting her; why can't he take it like a man and leave her alone?"

Veronica rose to her feet, dabbing at her eyes, trying to control the little bubbles of wild laughter still rising in her throat.

"I'm so sorry, please excuse me. I think I'll go to my room."

As she went through the hall the telephone bell rang and she stopped automatically to answer it. Who could it be—at this time? Michael's voice said, "Veronica?"

The wild uncontrollable laughter died, and her distress was suddenly calmed.

"Yes, Michael?"

"I just thought I'd phone through and say good night."

That was all, and yet it was as though he had sensed her need. She said gratefully, "That was nice of you. Where are you phoning from?"

"From my hotel. The *Eleganté*. I've booked rooms for you and your mother."

"But we can't possibly afford——" She began to protest, but he added quietly, "You'll be my guests, of course."

"Oh," she said and then, "Thank you."

He said gently, "Have you been crying? Have you changed your mind or something? If you'd like to call it all off you've only to say, you know—I'll understand."

"No, no, no," she cried. "I want to go on with it more than ever; I'm longing to get away."

"Methinks my lady doth protest too much," he said a trifle mockingly. "Have you seen Grierson?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"I'll see you tomorrow. You can tell me about it if you want to, or you needn't. Just as you like. Good night, Veronica, and don't cry. It really isn't worth it."

"Good night," she said.

She stood at the foot of the stairs hesitatingly. She had been going to run to the sanctuary of her own room and give way to the tears which threatened to overwhelm her. She looked at herself in the mirror in the hall stand, removed the tearstains with her handkerchief, powdered her face. Then she went back into the dining room and took her place at the table.

"I apologize for being such an idiot," she said. "I'm quite all right now."

"Who was that on the phone?" asked Mr Crane.

"It was Michael," she replied quietly. "To say good night."

They talked again of clothes; after dinner they played cards, quietly and decorously, and Veronica did not allow her nerves to master her again. She did not sleep much that night, but she did not lie awake and weep. She had found some kind of quiet; whether it was numb resignation or the beginning of peace she could not say.

Chapter Six

WHEN THEY LEFT THE TRAIN at Baker Street next day there was quite a crowd of people, and for a moment Veronica could not see Michael. She was seized again with that tormenting sense of unreality. It wasn't true; it was all part of a fantastic dream. She would find herself back in Seadon, meeting Alan as usual, talking to him, laughing with him. She had dreamed before that they had parted—this was only another dream.

Then she saw Michael's tall figure thrusting through the crowd toward her, and the fantastic dream became reality. He was still some way away, and for the first time she had a chance of looking at him—really looking at him objectively. Before he had always been too close to see, a figure at her elbow, like a friendly shadow, drawing her back from pain and danger, making her face life. But she looked at him now, thinking curiously, "This is Michael Carson; this is the man you are to marry."

She was startled, as she had been when he had first come

into their drawing room at Seadon, by his height. He was one of the tallest men she had ever seen, with lean rangy hips and waist, great wide shoulders. But now she saw the fine carriage of his head, the vivid blue of his eyes in his brown face, the lines about his strong, sensitive mouth. There was a sense of tempered strength about him. "Here is a man," a stranger would say, "who has been through all the fires of life, has known many experiences and has found his place in the world."

He came up to them, gave her a swift glance and bent and kissed her. She was becoming used to these light kisses when her mother was present; his eyes twinkled again, as though it were some game they were playing.

"Hallo, there," he said. "How are you? Hallo, Mrs Crane. Have a pleasant journey?"

"Thank you, yes, Michael. I suppose I may call you Michael."

Mrs Crane was always just a little flustered in his presence. She had never had to cope with anyone quite so large and masculine before.

He smiled at her gently. "Why not? Let's get these things up to the hotel, and then we'll get some lunch. I'm not going to let you two loose in the shops until tomorrow. You both look tired; let's have a day off today."

"You won't come with us then?" asked Mrs Crane with a touch of coyness. Michael's gentle, amused deference brought out a sparkle in her that Veronica had not seen in years. It made her realize that this faded little mother of hers must have once been quite a pretty woman.

"I will not," he said definitely. "There's only one thing more out of place than a man in a dress shop, a woman in a public house."

"I quite agree with you," said Mrs Crane.

"Why, Mother," said Veronica reprovingly, "when ever have you been in a public house?"

"I haven't. I didn't say really, Veronica." They laughed at her confession. Veronica suddenly felt confident, safe and friendly.

The rooms Michael had booked for them at the *Eleganté* were a revelation to Veronica. She had spent most of her life at and about Seadon, and her experience of hotels had been of small seaside affairs or cheap pensions on brief Continental holidays. To her the *Eleganté* seemed the last word in luxury. Her bedroom with its pale pastel green and ivory brocades, its crystal lights and soft deep carpet made her catch her breath with pleasure. On her dressing table was a basket of deep red roses which Michael had had sent up for her.

She buried her face in their velvet, scented darkness and said huskily, "Thank you, but you shouldn't have done it."

"Why not? You need that sort of thing, Veronica." He came and stood near her, near enough to catch the perfume of the roses, the perfume of her soft dark hair. "You need to be made important to yourself. Hasn't anyone ever told you how lovely you are? Why, most women with your loveliness would be intolerably conceited."

Alan had told her she was lovely, but it was a reflected sort of loveliness—she was lovely in his eyes because she belonged to him. This was different; this was homage, every woman's birthright at some time of her life.

"You must be a millionaire," she said shyly.

"You've never asked about that, about money, have you?"

"I've never really thought about it," she said honestly.

"No; a rare quality," he said slowly. "I suppose you would have come bolting to me for shelter even if we'd

had to face a meager existence on my pay." He smiled, and the peculiar gentleness which always came into his voice when he spoke to her was particularly in evidence. "But, thank heavens, we don't have to. If the material pleasantness of life is going to help you, Veronica, I'll be able to give you that. You see, my elder brother died shortly after that trouble I told you about, and I came into the family inheritance." He looked at her ruefully. "Odd to think if he had died six months before I should have been married by now."

"It would have made so much difference—to her?"

"All the difference," he said quietly. "She married a very wealthy man."

"How awful to have missed your heart's desire by so short a margin," she said slowly. She was thinking, supposing she should by some such chance of fate become as wealthy as Alise—it was a ridiculous thought, but supposing it were possible?

He said dryly, "It seemed the devil's irony at the time, but not now; it seems rather fortunate."

"Yes?" Veronica's voice seemed a little doubtful.

He laughed at her. "Veronica," he said, "you are such a baby!"

"Why?" she asked indignantly.

"You saw Grierson last night?" he asked abruptly. She turned away. "Yes."

"Would it be impertinent to ask what he said? Don't answer if you'd rather not."

"Why not?" she asked defiantly. "You have the right to ask. He said——" She hesitated, the color flaring shamefully in her cheeks. "He said that his engagement need make no difference . . . to us." Her voice faded almost

to inaudibility, and for a moment his eyes blazed and his hands clenched with an overwhelming anger.

"And—in spite of that—if you had as much money as the Cheam girl—you would still want Grierson?" His eyes held hers, clear and questioning. "Would you?" he insisted.

"Perhaps not," she admitted slowly.

"Only perhaps?" A little shade, an almost unnoticeable flicker of disappointment clouded his eyes, then faded. He touched her shoulder gently. "I know . . . anything is better than the pain of loss." She looked up at him, surprised, relieved. She had half expected him to despise her for her weakness. "I'll leave you now," he said. "We'll have lunch here and have a round-table conference. Would you like that? And we'll go to a show tonight. Tomorrow you must get down to the serious business of shopping. I saw the vicar yesterday. We decided on the tenth; five days from now."

"Five days . . . it isn't very long, is it?"

"Scared? Wishing you hadn't decided to do this?"

She looked at him gravely. "Not if you don't."

"That's all right then." As he reached the door she said, "Thank you again for the flowers." He smiled and went out.

Over luncheon Mrs Crane opened the subject of Veronica's wedding dress. Michael had ordered skillfully, a clear soup, sole Mornay with mushrooms. The great cream-and-gold room was full of sunshine, of spring flowers, the light music of violins playing a Strauss waltz, of gay, well-dressed people, attentive silent-footed waiters. Michael had insisted on cocktails. He had guessed correctly that Mrs Crane's life was a dull, uneventful routine, and he seemed as keen as Veronica that her mother should

be happy and at ease. He succeeded admirably. Mrs Crane was as happy as a child on a school treat. She was feeling full of well-being and success. Michael had insisted firmly, but tactfully, that he, too, should assist with Veronica's trousseau. Veronica was inclined to protest.

"It's not necessary, Michael," she said. "You're too good to me."

"How can I be?" he asked simply. "You're to be my wife."

Mrs Crane, scenting emotional depths, steered the conversation back to the wedding dress.

"I was wondering about white—and a veil," she said doubtfully. "After all, it's such a quiet wedding. No time to arrange a reception or anything like that."

"I'd like Veronica to wear white," Michael said quietly.

"Do you think it suitable?"

"Nothing else is." He looked across at Veronica, and she had a feeling that she knew little of him, that there were depths in him that it would take a lifetime to plumb. Alan had been like water, running gaily through the shallows; Michael was like the unknown, stilly depths of forest pool. He went on musingly: "It's a threshold, that day . . . to a greater splendor, to dull futility, to tragedy. But the day itself is there, untouched, hopeful, bright with promise. Every woman must look back on it like that, *should* look back on it like that, whatever it brings. I'd like you to, Veronica, and even if it is just to please me I'd like you to wear the symbolical white."

It was as though they were suddenly alone in that vast, pleasant, chattering room.

"Why, Michael," she said wonderingly, "I didn't know you were a poet."

He smiled wryly, drawing on the white tablecloth with

the blunt end of his fork, holding it in strong, nervous fingers.

"Unfortunately only a soldier."

"You think a poet is greater than a soldier?"

"Unquestionably."

"The pen is mightier than the sword," said Mrs Crane brightly. The conversation was getting a little out of hand and away from her. Michael went on as though to himself, as though he hadn't heard.

"A soldier is what his job makes him, however brilliant. A hired mercenary, a hero, a cog in the military machine . . . at his greatest, perhaps, the defender of an ideal. But it is the poets who *make* the ideals. They can be more dangerous than any gun. For right or wrong, sanity or sublime stupidity, they lead the way, while ordinary mortals stumble after them."

"But one can be a poet in one's heart, Michael," said Veronica eagerly. She had never spoken to anyone like this. A hundred unuttered thoughts came rushing to her lips, clamoring to speak; here was someone whom she could *talk* to. Who would not think she was talking "high-flown nonsense." "To be able to see, to understand, to appreciate. That's something great to have. Some people have it . . . the power to hear the great wings. . . ."

"Wings?" He looked up. "I have that anyhow. Not wings of thought; wings of metal, of wood and fabric. There's poetry in that, too, Veronica. I must take you up sometime. The sky's a dimension of its own, and our little world looks so small, so unimportant."

"The everlasting blue," she said.

"Well, it's settled then," said Mrs Crane firmly in the tone of one who would stand no more nonsense, "Veronica's to be married in white."

Suddenly, across the daffodils on the table, Michael and Veronica laughed into each other's eyes.

It was arranged that they should dine early at their hotel and go to a theater. In the afternoon Michael took them sight-seeing. "If you went to Paris or Vienna you'd insist on seeing all the historical and beautiful things. Just because this is London you'll get no farther than Oxford Street. There are beautiful things in London too." He drove them out to Hampton Court, and they wandered through the paneled rooms where Wolsey had lived and dreamed his long-dead dream of power and looked at the brilliant portraits of long-passed noblemen and kings. The gardens were a mass of cherry blossom, pink and white, and the grass was starred with daffodils, as though life with its passions and ambitions, its ruthless pride, had passed through this place and gone its way, leaving only the beauty and grandeur behind.

It was pleasant to get back, comfortably tired, to the cool luxury of her pastel-green room, to lay, soaking the tiredness out of her limbs, in the deep porcelain bath, with scented warm water up to her chin. She thought momentarily of Alan. Supposing one had been brought up in such luxury—could it get hold of one to such an extent that one would give up anything to keep it? She thrust the thought away, knowing it to be false. Luxury was pleasant, but it was only the surface of life; one would not notice its existence if the core were sound and beautiful. If Alan had only loved her she would not have cared how poor they were.

She took out the dress of corn-colored tulle which she had worn at the dance in the officers' mess at Seadon. As she stood before the glass, adding the final touches to her hair, it brought back that night with painful vividness.

But the vividness was gradually becoming blurred; a newer, more powerful thought was taking possession of her mind—Michael. Supposing she had met Michael before she had met Alan, how would she have seen the two men then? It was as though she had been shut up in a world apart these last two years, a world in which she and Alan were the sole inhabitants. She had seen no other men save Alan; she had been unaware of their existence. It was as though in the last two days she had come slowly out of her retreat and seen there were other people in the world.

In such a short while she had discovered so much. That a man had to have more than good looks and charm. There were other things: depth, dignity, kindness . . . and that other unexplicable feeling she had today, the feeling of being cared for, protected, *safe*. Michael might not love her—to all intents and purposes they were two strangers embarking on an impossible journey together—and yet she knew, somehow, that if she became Michael's wife he would always stand between her and the world, that nothing would ever hurt her again if it were within his power to prevent it.

She took a small pair of scissors from her manicure case and carefully clipped off the cluster of artificial field flowers on the shoulder of her dress. She took instead five of the dark red roses that Michael had given her and fastened them there. They were redder than heart's blood against her bare white shoulder. There was a tap on the door, and Mrs Crane came through the door that communicated with her room. She had not changed; she had been resting and pleaded a headache.

"Will you ask Michael to excuse me tonight, Veronica?" she said a trifle plaintively. "I found the afternoon rather tiring and the cocktails at lunch time—I'm not used to it,

you know. Besides, I've no doubt he'll be glad to have you on his own for a while."

He was waiting for her in the lounge when she came down; the severe black and white of his impeccable evening clothes suited him; it smoothed off his rugged, muscular strength and gave him an unexpected grace of carriage. Veronica conveyed Mrs Crane's apologies.

"I'm sorry about the headache," he said, taking her arm, "but I can't pretend to be sorry that we'll be alone. You and I have so much to talk about. Look here, let's skip the theater."

"But I thought you'd booked seats."

He smiled, that odd, entirely unexpected boyish grin of his. "I took a gamble and didn't. I had a premonition your mother wouldn't want to go out tonight."

"Michael," she said accusingly, her lips touched with laughter, "I shall begin to suspect you of double-dealing, of priming my very respectable mother with cocktails deliberately."

"I admit nothing." He laughed. "But since we are on our own let's behave in the conventional engaged-couple manner. There's been nothing very conventional about our engagement so far." He frowned for a moment consideringly. "Let me see now. If I was a very, very young flying officer and you were the only girl in the world—and a rich uncle had unexpectedly come up trumps with a fiver how should we proceed? Dinner, of course . . . lobster salad and the sentimental and unsuitable *pêche Melba* . . . cold wine and hot music . . . and . . . ?" Comically he looked to her for suggestions.

"The river," she offered tentatively. "The moon is hidden behind buildings in London."

"Of course, the very thing; we must have a moon. A

riverside club. Let's get my car out and go." He slipped his arm through hers and they went through the great gilded entrance hall to the revolving glass doors. The commissionaire sent round for the car, and within a short while they were edging westward through the London traffic.

He glanced at her in the shifting lights. It was as though they had known each other a long while. It seemed incredible that she had sat next to him only two days ago in this car, a stranger. Some people are never strangers. She had not changed. The pain that had nearly destroyed her had, if anything, etched her poignant beauty into finer lines, her pallor accentuating the delicacy of her fine bones, the high cheekbones and beautiful nose, the wide high forehead, the shadows under her eyes making them bigger and softer than ever, the sadness adding a deeper loveliness to the childish purity of her mouth.

"No reality tonight, Veronica; this is a game of make-believe. Though I'm afraid I'm not the type for Prince Charming."

"You're more like Lancelot," she said thoughtlessly. He said grimly, "'Seamed with an ancient sword cut on his cheek and bruised and bronzed and more than twice her years . . . !'" He laughed. "That rather smashes the make-believe."

"Tennyson certainly makes him sound a pretty tough customer," she said hurriedly. "You can claim to be bronzed though."

"And bruised too," he said. "Life bruises, Veronica." He paused and said quietly, "You've forgotten the rest of it. 'She lifted up her eyes and loved him with that love that was her doom.'"

"Poor Guinevere." She sighed, and her voice suddenly

became hard. "But not for me, no more hurt for my heart."

"Veronica," he said, "nothing you could feel for me or I for you will ever hurt you. You're never going to be hurt any more. I won't let life hurt you."

She put a hand on his arm gently. "Thank you, Michael."

They were leaving London behind now, running first through crowded streets of little shops and noisy markets and then quieter ways. Through tree-lined streets of little riverside bungalows and villas, then through the open fields near Runnymede.

He said, "Feel in my pocket, the breast pocket of my overcoat. There's something for you."

Obediently she slipped her fingers into his breast pocket and drew out a jeweler's leather box.

"Open it," he commanded.

In the light from the dashboard she saw the glitter of the diamond. A single square-cut stone, large and pure as a drop of frozen dew, shimmering with imprisoned fire.

"Oh, Michael," she said, "I didn't think you'd—you shouldn't—there's no need——" And then the purely feminine rising to the surface, "Oh, it's beautiful; it's so beautiful."

"Here." He pulled the car to a standstill under some trees. "Let me put it on."

He took the ring and a little clumsily put it on the third finger of her left hand. It occurred to her that Alan would never have done it in such a clumsy masculine way. He would have done it perfectly, tenderly, with just the right charming words and the right thrilling caress. And yet Alan had never put a ring on her finger. And there was something sincere, something that hurt your heart about the way Michael did it. She could not explain it. He gave

her hand a little squeeze and laid it back on her knee. "There, that's official."

"Michael," she said earnestly, "why are you trying to surround it with the trappings of romance—our marriage, I mean?"

"There's little in it for you. I'd like you to have all the pleasant, exciting outward show. And who knows," he said lightly, "it may be romance. It takes odd forms sometimes."

"No, not romance." She shook her head. "I know romance. The pain, the heartache, the uncertainty and the wonderful ecstasy that pays for it all,"

"If I can't give you the ecstasy at least you won't have the pain," he said with sudden, unexpected directness. "What do you expect to find with me, Veronica?"

"Escape," she said. The question was too direct to give a more pleasing answer; besides, he didn't want it. Michael would never want anything but the truth. "Safety, peace."

"Veronica," he said strangely, and as she turned, questioningly, to that odd note of appeal in his voice he took her in his arms and kissed her once on her parted, surprised lips. Kissed her with a man's possession, fulfillment and purpose, so that a broken shudder of response rose within her, a swift rise of feeling that came and broke and receded like a wave, leaving her shaken, wondering, yet quite unafraid.

"But you said," she faltered. "You said——"

"I wanted nothing you feel you cannot give me." He smiled. "That's true; I don't. Forget that kiss if you like, Veronica."

He might have said, "If you can." Could she forget it? He wanted nothing unless . . . unless she gave it of her

own free will. Did he think that she might one day turn to him with the warmth and passion she had lavished on Alan. That was impossible. Yet that kiss burned on her lips, seemed to burn right down into her heart. With Alan she had been sailing over dangerous, tricky, uncertain rapids, terrifying but exhilarating. Now she was at sea, sailing uncharted depths, taken by a current that would bear her strongly and steadfastly . . . but where? She had a feeling of being up against something unknowable, something she didn't understand, too big for her present understanding. It was like standing on the brink of a wonderful experience . . . and she drew back, for she had tasted love and she was afraid. Love meant pain. She did not want to taste that draught again.

It was early in the season. The Café Vienna was pleasantly full but not crowded. Not yet the hot summer nights when terrace and gardens would be full of elegant young people and electric launches would take romantic couples up the river's romantic willow-studded ribbon. The great plate-glass windows were closed between the draped satin curtains, but one could see the water, coldly silver, gleaming across the lawn. A pale pink blossom tree threw its rapturous spray against the glass outside, tapping in the wind, like spring seeking admittance.

They ordered a light meal and champagne, and when their glasses were filled Michael raised his in a toast. He was strange tonight, changed; all his forbidding reserve had dropped from him; it was as though she had discovered a new Michael Carson whom no one but herself knew.

"To romance, Veronica?" he said mockingly, but there was a gentleness about his mockery, as though he could read the confusion and doubt which surrounded her.

"I thought we had both finished with romance forever," she said faintly.

His strange, ice-blue eyes lit with a sudden flame, caught her to him as though he had caught her in his arms.

"Perhaps neither of us has ever known it," he replied.

Chapter Seven

THE NEXT FEW DAYS she spent in London seemed like a dream to Veronica, a strange, inconsequential, rushing dream in which she stood for hours being fitted, in which she bought more hats and gloves, stockings and lingerie and dresses than she had ever seen in her life before. Yet every day Michael managed to get her to himself for an hour or so, away from the feverish rush of shopping and her mother's fussy anxiety that "everything should go off well." And always, when Michael took possession, there was calm and quiet humor and the healing touch of beauty.

Sometimes he would arrive at the dove-gray salon near Bond Street where she was having her wedding dress made and would carry her off for an hour for tea in the Embankment Gardens or in the park where the tulips marched like fairy soldiers in their brilliant lines of color and the trees were heavy with the first brilliant surge of greenery. They would sit idly, not talking much, throwing

crumbs to the pigeons and sparrows on the grass. Sometimes he would take her to see a picture or a piece of statuary that appealed to him or some old, lovely thing in a museum. Michael knew a surprising amount about these things, and he had a pleasant way of never boring one with a display of his knowledge and never exhausting one with long, wearying tours where too much was seen and nothing appreciated.

He would say to her, apropos of nothing, "Have you seen the wrought-iron gates and *rejas* in the Victoria and Albert Museum? I often think it is a pity serenading is out of fashion . . . a picturesque custom."

And knowing his habit of humming tunelessly when absorbed in some work or driving the car, she said laughingly, "Michael, do anything but sing to me. I don't think I could stand that!"

But they had gone to see the *rejas*, those black flowers of iron that separated the Spaniard of old time from his lady, and they went straight out into the sunshine again, while Michael talked, a little and interestingly, of the artists who had wrought these beauties and the civilization that had produced them.

"Spain has traveled a long way from the *rejas* and the love song," he said a little bitterly. "Bombs and machine guns, brother fighting against brother. Who says the world progresses?"

She put her hand instinctively into his arm, as one will with a lover or a well-loved friend when things uncomprehensible and frightening are discussed. "Come what may, we two have met; that is something," that gesture said. Veronica was quite unaware of it, but Michael's pulses stirred at that light, confiding pressure on his arm.

Veronica found this business of getting to know Michael

the one sane and steady thing in the rush of preparing to be his wife. Arrangements, clothes, the bustle of preparation, all this was curiously unreal. But Michael, becoming more and more aware of him, finding every day new facets to his character, finding his friendship wonderfully worth while, this was becoming a steadfast and glowing reality.

She would not think of love; she fought against the thought that she might be falling in love with him. It didn't happen like that. She knew. She knew too much about it. She was too worldly wise, she told herself, to be trapped into love again. He had not kissed her since the night he had given her the engagement ring, and yet the memory of that kiss persisted, flickering like a hidden flame behind their coolest, most detached moment. She would remember the touch of his firm lips against hers and look across at him, at the fine, compact, tall maleness of him, at his strange blue eyes with their hint of hidden, controlled fires, his firm, tender mouth. She would remember, and the blood would come to her cheeks as she remembered, and she would feel strangely shy with him and somehow inadequately young and inexperienced.

They went back to Seadon on the Friday. Michael drove them back in the car. And as they turned off the London road into the sleepy High Street with its little shops and old thatched-roofed cottages it seemed to Veronica that she had already been away for a long time, that she was changed, as though a fuller, wider life had already claimed her. For the first time she did not belong among small local things and petty local happenings.

They were to be married on Monday, very quietly, early in the morning. Billy Lennard was to be best man, and no one else would attend except her mother and stepfather. They had arranged to send the bulk of their luggage in

advance to El-Hussar, the little station near Alexandria where they would live, and were taking the car overland to Marseilles. The car was not new or particularly smart, so, as Michael had said, "The combination of Continental cobbles and Egyptian sand won't break our hearts, and it will get us about."

Veronica was allowing herself to think of her wedding day. It still seemed far away, this prelude to the unknown, and yet she no longer thought of it with dread. It was no longer a desperate step in the dark. She *knew* Michael now, and in spite of the apparent madness of this step she was going to take and her doubt as to the wisdom of their marriage she was longing now to get away, to stretch her wings, to see the great world. All she had ever read of Egypt, of its mystery, its ageless beauty, its mixed medley of races, came back to her. Seadon seemed small in those two days before her wedding, small and stifling. She was filled with a consuming impatience to have done with it, to be off and away. Its pretty old-world charm seemed to encompass her like narrow walls. She longed to get away.

Their decision to marry had been followed so swiftly by her trip to London that no one had had an opportunity to congratulate her. They came now, in droves, it seemed to Veronica. She seemed to spend her day handing tea, smiling automatically, listening to the ironical, fatuously repeated refrain, "Poor Alan . . . you *naughty* girl. Don't *tell* me you've only just met Mr Carson. You've been keeping this up your sleeve for some while." Or, "Poor Alan. Still it's *just* as well for a girl to have two strings to her bow." The only thing that made it at all bearable was her mother's shiningly contented face. Her

pride and Veronica's had been saved before the village—that was the most important thing.

Michael avoided these hen parties like a plague. He was staying at the local inn, busy making arrangements and seeing to the safe dispatch of his kit from the camp. But when he did by accident fall foul of one his tact and non-committal charm was disarming. Every one of the ladies declared Flight Lieutenant Carson charming, and none of them realized that they had entirely failed to worm any information out of him regarding Veronica and his approaching marriage.

Sunday dawned wetly, the rain clouds rolling down from the hills. Michael gallantly offered to drive Mr and Mrs Crane to church, and Veronica, rather guiltily, cried off. She was busy packing their wedding presents, well wrapped in paper and shavings, in a crate to be forwarded to them as soon as they knew their permanent address. He put them, both a little fussed and excited over the approaching wedding, into the car and turned back to Veronica smilingly, putting out his hand. "Until tomorrow, Veronica." She gave him her hand and for the first time could not meet his eyes. Her lashes covered her eyes, and they made soft dark circles on her cheeks. He gave her hand the tiniest squeeze and said gently, "Afraid? You can change your mind still, you know. I'll understand."

She looked up then. No, she wasn't afraid. It was just that an inexplicable rush of emotion had possessed her at the thought that tomorrow, in a few short hours, she would be his wife. She said swiftly, "Until tomorrow, Michael."

He did not give her his usual light courtesy kiss for the benefit of the village street. It would have been sheer mockery. He must take her into his arms and kiss her, well

and truly, as—for he admitted it to himself now—as a man must kiss the woman he loves or not at all. But she was not ready yet. Perhaps she never would be; perhaps she would never turn to him, as he hoped, with love and the wonderful dawning of passion. But to care for her, to have her bear his name and have the right to protect her, that was something anyway. He gave her hand another reassuring little grip and let it go. After tomorrow she would be his wife. Nothing should hurt her then, and he would give his life to making up for the pain and humiliation she had suffered.

The day passed quickly. Never had she known a rainy day fly past like this. Everything was packed and in readiness. Her wedding dress, long, graceful and formal, of glistening white and silver brocade lay on the old-fashioned chintz-covered ottoman, together with her white satin shoes, the posy of orange blossom to wear atop her dark head and the flowing froth of her veil.

Evening fell quickly, for although the rain had ceased the clouds were still rolling down from the hills. On Sundays the formal seven-o'clock dinner was superseded by a late cold supper at the Crane's, and even the momentous event of Veronica's wedding could not upset Mrs Crane's household routine.

So at seven o'clock Veronica threw on an old tweed coat, and whistled to her mother's ancient and obese fox terrier. She had not been out of the house all day and longed for some air. She went down the High Street, its wet pavements reflecting the street lamps in long yellow patches, and turned along a winding paved lane, bound on one side by fields and on the other by a swiftly flowing millstream.

On the opposite side of the water the terraced gardens

of the Grange Farm and its home paddock ran down to the edge of the water. The heavy rain clouds were lifting a little and the dusk was blue over the rustling, sliding water. The terrier waddled on ahead, investigating hedge-row rustlings, spiritually back in the days when he really could give a rabbit a run for its money.

Veronica hadn't been near this place since the night of Alan's engagement. It had been their trysting place, and until tonight she had deliberately avoided it; it held too much beauty for her and too much pain. She turned the corner by the great old elm, and there was the little white footbridge running across the stream to Grange Farm fields. It was there that Alan would wait for her, had waited for her so often. Why had she come tonight? To steep herself in the past, to lacerate her heart anew? Or to test herself, to find out exactly where she stood emotionally? To face herself in all honesty?

There was the gate where they had stood together, feeding the little colts who came nuzzling velvet noses through the bars to them. There was the overhanging willow where they had sat, high over the stream, hidden from everyone, laughing and love-making through a summer's evening.

Something in Veronica said fiercely, "This is the worst part; this is where treachery stabs at you. If he could be untrue to this there never could have been any sincerity in his heart, even through all that time when we were happy." And then, like a draught of ice-cold water, like the blue, honest glance of Michael's eyes, the admission came to her, "It doesn't hurt; it doesn't hurt any longer. Something has killed it. It's over. I'm free of Alan forever."

She rounded the corner by the great elm tree and came in full sight of the footbridge. She could see the white bars

gleaming palely in the dusk. Almost she fancied she could see Alan standing there waiting for her. She stopped and peered through the shifting tree shadows and saw it really was Alan, a dim, graceful figure, leaning against the white rails as she had seen him so many times. He came forward swiftly.

"Verry . . . I felt you'd come tonight."

She glanced at him in amazement, not at his presence there, but bewildered by her own calm, the lack of emotion the meeting caused, bewildered by the cold, analytical way in which her mind examined him. Once she would have accepted his words as a romantic fact; once she would have believed that there was such a sympathy between them that he *could* know. Now she said coolly, "You're sure you didn't see me in the High Street, Alan, and follow me along the opposite bank?"

He did not answer, but she could sense the angry flush that ran up his cheeks at her shrewd guess. Something within her said, "Sham, it's all sham. This that I once would have staked my life on." But because of this her heart was not heavy, nor her world black. She did not care any more; she was free.

"Verry," he burst out as though intent on recapturing the atmosphere of romance which her dry words had so carelessly destroyed. "I must speak to you. You can't go through with this thing tomorrow."

"Alan, don't let's go over all that again."

"You belong to me; you love me. You can't marry him!"

Her voice said calmly, proudly, "I don't belong to anyone but myself now, Alan."

"Verry," he said desperately, "listen, darling. I've been in hell this past week. I've been thinking of nothing else,

trying to find a way out. There isn't one. But I'll take a chance. It means ruin for Mother and I, but I'll break off my engagement to Alise if you'll marry me. I don't know what we'd do, how we'd live, but I'd risk that."

She smiled in the dusk at his heroics. They seemed so naïve now. She couldn't imagine that once, a very short while ago, he had been able to sway her emotions or that she had thrilled to that passionate, youthful voice. "I've grown up," she thought quickly.

"Thank you, Alan," she said quietly; "it's very noble and brave of you"—for her life she couldn't resist the gentle sarcasm—"but it's much too late. You see, I just don't care any more."

Angry at her cool indifference, he attempted to catch her in his arms, his hands closing fiercely on her shoulders, but she struggled with swift fury.

"*Don't touch me!*" she said.

There was something intoxicating about her indifference. He wanted her as he had never wanted her. And she was angry, really angry, as though he had no right to touch her, almost as though that right belonged to someone else.

He said dully, "It's true. You don't care." Then angrily, "Then why are you going through with this intolerable farce? You don't care for me; you haven't your pride to save now. Why are you marrying Carson, Veronica?"

His voice was suspicious and accusing. Why? His words seemed to echo down a long empty place where Veronica stood alone, searching her heart for an answer to that question. *Why, Veronica, why?* She did not care for Alan; she was free, heart-whole. *But was she?* Never once had she thought of stopping her marriage to Michael . . . never once since . . . since that night he had put his ring on her

finger and kissed her. At that memory it seemed as though her heart suddenly turned over within her and then raced on like a mad thing; everything seemed blindingly clear. Her hands flew to her lips to still their sudden trembling. She wanted to go and find him, to seek him out, to go calling his name, "Michael, *Michael*, my dear," but it was not so simple as that. He had kissed her, yes; he had asked her to be his wife. But he had spoken no word of love to her . . . he had offered the refuge and respect of his name . . . and that kiss, that one kiss, might have meant everything or nothing. It might have been a conventional gesture, sealing their engagement, or a tribute to her presence and the spring night. But he had not spoken about love; he had told her to forget it if she wanted to. She stood gazing up at Alan, her eyes wide and wondering, as though she was seeing through and past him to something very wonderful, something just out of her reach.

"You haven't answered me, Verry," he said.

She shook her head. "I can't; I don't *know* why."

"And yet you're marrying him tomorrow?"

She nodded in silence. He stood there helplessly, not knowing quite what to do or what to say; she seemed so strange, so far from him, as though he had never known her. He knew then that it was no use, that he had lost her forever. He said awkwardly for Alan, usually so competent to deal with all situations, "Well, I suppose this is good-by."

"Good-by, and thank you, Alan."

"For what?" he asked bitterly.

"For showing me my heart," she said breathlessly.

He called her name sharply, "Veronica . . ." feeling for the first time in his selfish life the sharp, final pain of loss. He had never really believed she would leave him. How-

ever he had planned his life, he had never planned it without Veronica. He watched her go, a swift shadow in the dusk, heard her low call to the dog, heard it pass him with an elderly scuffle and obese breath. It paused, wagged recognition; it had so often accompanied them, and there was something foolishly poignant about its recognition. He knew that she had gone out of his life, that he might never see her again. He turned toward his home to face the life he had chosen, anger and loss and the spoiled child that had always dwelled within him fighting together in his heart. He would do what they wanted, what he thought he wanted. He'd be this rich girl's husband. But a tight, troublesome little knot of rebellion was already in his heart. By heaven, he'd make life pay for taking Verry away from him.

Chapter Eight

VERONICA AWOKE. The clouds had gone. The sun was streaming through the window, lighting the shabby furniture in her room with unaccustomed splendor. An old catch jingled absurdly through her head, "Happy is the bride whom the sun shines upon." Her heart beat with a queer, defiant exultance. Today was her wedding day. She was going to be married to Michael. She glanced at her watch. She had slept later than she meant to. It was just after seven; she had to be at the church at a quarter to nine. There was a knock, and Edie came in, beaming, with a breakfast tray, bursting with curiosity and a sense of romance. Life was difficult for Edie these days. This wedding of Miss Veronica's was *the* village topic for the moment. So unexpected, so queer! And Edie had basked in the surrounding aura of interest. She acquired a little reflected mystery. But it really was a little mean of Miss Veronica to say absolutely nothing about it because, of course, people expected her to be in the know. Still Mr

Carson was very handsome in a grim sort of way. Not a patch on Mr Grierson though. Like a film star *he* was. And whatever people said about it being rebound or reaction or something, there was no doubt that Miss Verry seemed real happy and excited this morning.

She put her tray down and beamed, a little at a loss for words.

"Good morning, Edie. Thank you." Veronica was surprised at the calmness of her own voice.

Edie drew the curtains, murmured something about the weather and finally burst out, "Oh, miss, I do wish you every happiness. Aren't you afraid, miss, going off into a strange country with——" She nearly added "a strange gentleman" but stopped in time. "All those Arabs and things," she added doubtfully.

"If I get carried off by a sheik I'll promise to let you know," Veronica said lightly. "Start my bath, please, Edie. And then I think you'd better give Mother a hand; she's far more fussed than I am."

When she had gone Veronica drank a cup of tea and tried to eat, but she was too excited and too nervous to swallow more than a mouthful. She got up and was thankful there was so much to do; bath, hair, nails, the arrangement of her dress and veil to take up her time. She moved as though in a dream. The gracious, dark-haired, dark-eyed fairy-tale princess in the mirror in the silvery white brocade gown with the clouds of veil about her seemed to have no relation to herself. She had been going to marry a man she did not love, but that was all passed now. Did Michael love her? Could he love her? He knew her so well. He knew what a coward she had been . . . she switched her thoughts abruptly away and took up the small cluster of lilies of the valley she was to hold.

Downstairs her father stood nervously polishing his sill hat. Her mother, surprisingly pretty in pale gray and violet, fluttered round, looking over the little buffet table in the drawing room, issuing absurd orders to Edie and canceling them immediately afterward. The scent of the flowers in Veronica's hands drifted about her like a benediction.

Her mother kissed her. "I'm off now, darling. Good luck."

And then the car was at the door, and Mr Crane was saying rather importantly, "Come, Veronica." In the car on the way to the church he said quite unexpectedly, "If ever you want to come home, Veronica, don't forget that your mother and I are very"—he searched for words, ponderous and slightly embarrassed, and finished up rather inadequately—"very fond of you," and was surprised by Veronica's swift kiss on his cheek, the only time she had kissed him since she was grown-up, and her quick, "Thank you, darling."

They went up the church path together, between the ancient gravestones and the yew trees. In the porch Veronica stopped, frightened, amazed. She had expected only to see her mother, Michael and Billy Lennard, but the church was crowded to the door.

She was afraid. She was not prepared for this. She felt that all the eyes that looked on her as the congregation rose at her entrance were looking at her with curiosity rather than sympathy, that they had come to pry, not to wish her well. *People!* The exultant wedding march from Lohengrin rolled forth majestically to greet her, and suddenly she smiled . . . that was Michael. He had guessed people would come; that was why he had insisted on all the royal trimmings of ceremony. She saw his tall bronze-fair

head, towering above Billy's dark curly one, far beyond the crowd. He turned his head for an instant, and his glance gave her courage, as in a dream she moved down the aisle to meet him.

She repeated words, stark, solemn sounding, and she heard Michael repeating them; a plain ring of smooth white gold was slipped above the glittering diamond on her finger. They were signing the register . . . Veronica Shale, spinster . . . her mother was kissing her tearfully, and Billy was shaking Michael's hand as though it were a pump handle. They were walking back between the lines of village folk, and then, to her utter surprise, came a shower of confetti and paper rose petals. That was Edie. Then another. The color rose to her cheeks; her eyes shone with a sudden rush of tears; her heart overflowed with happiness. They hadn't come from curiosity after all. They had come to wish her well. Out of her pain, her humiliation, she had misjudged them. They had gossiped and commented—who doesn't?—but really they wished her well. She smiled radiantly. As she passed through them to the car on her tall new husband's arm she looked so flushed and lovely that no one among them—even Miss Penner who had told everyone that dear Veronica was doing this out of sheer pique—could doubt her happiness.

Then they were sitting in the car, and she was saying, a trifle shakily, "What a ridiculous hat, Michael!"

He looked gloomily at the plume of his ceremonial hat and said, "It looks even worse on," and put it on to prove it. Veronica's gathering tears dissolved in laughter.

Paris—first stage of wedding trip. It was early morning, and Veronica sat up in the middle of her tremendous and sinfully comfortable bed in the middle of the ornate

cream-and-gold room. Outside the sparrows, voluble French sparrows, were chattering and fighting. The windows were closed tightly against the persistent barrage of noise, the piercing whistle of the gendarme on point duty, the continual impatient hooting of the stream of motors along the Rue de Rivoli. It was incomprehensible to Veronica how a nation with such an innate knowledge of beauty could tolerate such insistent, ugly noise.

She rose and wrapped a long dressing gown about her, a thing of the softest angora, the blue of a thrush's egg, lined with tailored reverses of crepe de chine, and went to the window, pulling aside the frilled ninon curtain to look out. Beyond the shattering stream of hooting traffic the Jardin de Tuileries shone green and glistening in the sunshine. She had slept well and felt wonderfully rested, although she had managed an hour's sleep during the crossing. She had been too tired to go out last night. They would spend another night in Paris and then go on to Dijon and so on toward Marseilles.

Her mind went back to the day before, to her wedding, to the absurd little reception. Mr and Mrs Crane, herself, Michael and Billy. Billy, very handsome in his splendid uniform, very gay, toasting and insisting upon kissing the bride, making them all laugh, warning she and Michael that they wouldn't be long without him.

"I know I'm due for overseas," he told Veronica, "and I'm praying with crossed fingers that I'll follow you to Egypt."

"I hope so too," said Veronica eagerly. "It would be grand to have our own friends, someone we know from home, out there."

"Veronica," he said, puzzled, "you're changed. What is it? You—you look radiant this morning."

"So she should on her wedding day," said Mrs Crane.

Veronica had smiled. "It's a secret. I'll tell you one day."

Billy looked from her to Michael, a little puzzled. She was so different. She was bewilderingly lovely. He had been against this marriage. He had told Michael that they had a chance in a hundred of making a go of it. Everyone knew that Verry had always been head over heels in love with Alan. The young skunk. How could she be happy married to another man?

And yet she looked happy. She wore this strange inner radiance, so lovely in her graceful bridal things that his susceptible heart gave an uncomfortable lurch; he wished unreasonably that he'd noticed her before. He turned to Michael and said lightly, "Glad I was the one to push you off, old man." His gay smile was a trifle grim. "Our family owes you a debt of happiness."

Behind Veronica's head Michael gave a tiny, discouraging frown. Veronica and he were facing new beginnings . . . he wanted no reminders of dead pain. He said quickly, "*You* have no debts to pay, Billy," and the conversation had sheered away to something else.

Afterward, when the light luggage they were traveling with was strapped in the dicky seat and the car was running Londonward away from Seadon, Veronica had said impulsively, "I hope Billy comes out to Egypt, don't you, Michael? He's fun and such a dear."

"I hope so too. It's good to work with your friends, though it's too much to hope he'll be sent to El-Hussar."

"He's like Alan," she said, slowly reflective. "Or rather he's like Alan should have been, what I thought Alan was. Young, gallant, gay, and yet he's honest and brave as well." A little flicker of shadow had crossed Michael's face, so that she had said swiftly, "Alan! . . . It all seems so far

away. I—I can even talk of him now without it hurting.” They had driven on in silence for a while, and then she had said, “What will it be like at El-Hussar, Michael?”

“It’s a smallish station, just by Alexandria,” he said.

“But what will it be *like*?” she repeated.

“Sand and Arabs and palm trees, just like a date-box cover outside the camp . . . inside flatness and white dust, incredible neatness—and flies,” he teased.

“Michael,” she said reproachfully, “you leave me little to dream about.”

“You won’t have much time to dream,” he said, smiling. “Alexandria’s fun. Yachting, swimming, racing, a great cosmopolitan town, minarets and cinemas, palm trees and cabarets, the up-to-date, rapid, modern new veneering the ever-existing and ageless. Nights like black velvet, jeweled black velvet. In Egypt the stars are very near, Veronica.”

“That’s better.” She had smiled.

They had had a good channel crossing, and the Jugger-naut, as Michael called the two-seater, had been shipped without mishap. They had arrived in Paris late and had dined and gone to their rooms—two rooms communicating by a cream-and-gilt door. It had been strange undressing in the great room with its subdued gilt glitter, knowing that Michael was going to sleep so near.

She had slipped into her tailored silk pajamas and turned the lights out and drawn back the curtains, watching the headlights from the cars race across the heavily molded ceiling. She was very still, listening, waiting . . . and yet what was she waiting for? For Michael to come, for Michael to be a lover to her as he was a husband? She knew he would not, not unless she spoke. Yet how could she, not knowing what was in his heart?

She sat on the edge of the bed, a slender, youthful figure linking her bare arms about her knees. She pulled her feet into bed and reached out to turn off the rose-shaded lamp. Suddenly she was quite still. There on the little bedside table was the key to the intervening door. A hot little flush stole up her cheeks; it had not been there before. Michael must have put it there while she was in the bathroom. She rose and went across the soft carpet on tiptoe and tried the handle very gently. It was locked.

She stood with the key in her trembling hands, remembering, "I want nothing that you feel you cannot give me."

She was torn between doubt and exultation. The key was in her hands. If only she could tell Michael what was in her heart, this new-found, tremulous beauty that knew nothing of thoughtless impulse, of reckless possession. It was like a star which one reached up to grasp, shining and steadfast, filling one's whole life with splendor, tantalizingly out of reach.

"But if he does not care? What am I to do if he does not care?" The thought came back and mocked at her maliciously. She turned and ran back to the great opulent bed, burying her face in the pillows, pressing her hot eyelids against their softness. She had married Michael to find peace, not this new, absorbing wonder. But since it had come she was helpless before it. She could do nothing but welcome it with hungry arms and clutch it to her breast.

Chapter Nine

ON THROUGH FRANCE, southward toward the Mediterranean, Dijon, Lyons, along the winding roadway through the tree-clad hills, staying a night at Avignon with its gray old walls and dreaming river and then swinging eastward, away from Marseilles, where they would return to catch the steamer to Alexandria. Eastward, southward, running from spring foliage, from budding greenness and the delicacy of spring into what seemed full summer, where the Maritime Alps flung their towering shelter round the azure coast, the coast that slips precipitously into the blue and gold of the sea, like mountaintops round which a flood has risen. It seemed to Veronica that the sun god dwelt in Africa and turned his shimmering hot glance across the blue Mediterranean, touching the coast of France until it blazed like a tropical flower.

Michael knew of a small fishing village near St Tropez where he wanted to stay, and when they ran down the steep hillside road which wound, dusty white, between

the olive trees she knew why. It was a place one would return to; it would draw one back . . . it had no mystery, only simplicity and beauty.

It reminded her of a Cornish village, with its white houses clustering about the thick, gray harbor walls, fishing boats rocking at anchor, fishermen plodding home on slow feet, black eyes glancing at them incuriously as they passed, bright, Latin, in the bronzed peasant faces. But it was Cornwall painted by an artist mad with color. Here was no shimmering light blue, no pale, sea-soaked gold. Here the sea was the blue of a madonna's gown, purpling where it met the horizon, the sinking sun flamed in fiery splendor, leaving the sky plumed with tiny crimson clouds. In the harbor in the oily shadows there seemed liquid emerald and amethyst, and the sails of the fishing boats were scarlet and rusty brown, each one carrying at its mast point an emblem or shrine, a madonna, a fish, a primitive St Peter, little emblems of faith rocking against the magnificent sky. The white walls of the houses and little enclosed courtyards tumbled with roses and bougainvillaea. . . . There were lemon trees, the blossoms gone, the fruits already swelling, but green and unripe. And behind the town the gray-green olive-clad hills, with an occasional row of cypress, stark and dark and pointed, emphasized the brilliance and color of the little town.

They swung past the harbor and up again into the narrow cobbled high street, pulling up before the one small hotel. Its low, irregular frontage was brave with new paint and bright window boxes; from house to house, all along the street, buntings fluttered. Michael stopped the car and climbed out, stretching his long, cramped limbs. He wore flannels and a short-sleeved blue sports shirt, and his face and arms were deeply bronzed.

"I'll go and see about rooms," he said. "I hope we're lucky. There seems to be some sort of celebration, and they may be busy. I feel pleasantly hungry and in no mood to go farther on."

Veronica smiled absently, rather like a sleepy cat on a sunny wall. The sun had caught her, too, and although she did not bronze easily it seemed as though she was filled with the pleasant laziness of sunshine. Her pale skin had turned a golden brown; a light sprinkle of freckles had added a charming piquancy to her rather grave beauty. But she watched Michael go with eyes that were a little strained and shadowed. Escape? She had married him for escape. But there was no such thing as escape from life or from love. He came back presently with the hotel porter, who began to unload their things, explaining volubly the reason for the street decorations.

"We're lucky," Michael told her. "There's some sort of feast day and celebration tomorrow, a procession and a fair. The hotel is full; we've got the last rooms."

He took the car round into the garage at the back, and they went through the cobbled yard, where the chickens strutted and pecked in the sunshine and a white kid was tethered, calling pathetically for its mother, who appeared at the sight of strangers, watching them with truculent agate eyes.

Michael signed the register, and they followed the porter up the stairs. "I think it's the royal suite," Michael whispered comically. "He said everything but their best rooms had gone."

They were shown through a door on the first floor into a determinedly respectable private sitting room. The stiff Victorian furniture, the aggressive neatness of everything was belied by the ecstatic blue of the sea outside,

the roses tumbling over the balcony rails, the shouting colors of the harbor, they seemed to be telling the priggish little room that it was in the south as blatantly as a carnival passing beneath the window.

The porter passed into a farther room, put down their bags and returned. Indicating the room, he said with justifiable pride, "The bedroom, monsieur, *and* the bathroom"—he made an expressive little gesture—"complete . . ." beamed, bowed and left them. It was obviously the only *suite* of rooms in the hotel, and they were very proud of it. But there was only one bedroom. Veronica felt Michael's bewildered, exasperated glance, and the color crept up her cheeks.

He turned to start after the man. "Here, I asked for two rooms——" he began. Veronica began to laugh helplessly.

"There *are* two rooms here, Michael."

He stopped. "But if it's going to be awkward for you——"

Her eyes were solemn, but her mouth quivered with suppressed laughter as she surveyed the stiff horsehair settee between the two french windows. "I'm awfully afraid it's going to be awkward for you, Michael," she said innocently.

His eyes kindled to laughter, relieved that she was going to see the lighter side of the situation. It was getting late, and they had driven over a hundred miles that day. He said grimly, "Huh! Piracy, eh?"

"Oh, Michael"—she smiled—"you'd really rather sleep on it than endeavor to explain why it isn't suitable, wouldn't you?"

He rubbed his short bronze-colored hair a little ruefully, imagining himself trying to explain to the pro-

prietor, who had beamed on him with the liquid romantic eyes of a southern Frenchman, just why one bedroom wasn't suitable for a young married couple. Veronica was being a little sport, and yet, for his own sake, he wished there was other accommodation . . . that she should be so near him in her sweet, mysterious femininity. He was only human. . . .

"You're sure you don't mind?" he said.

"If you're sure that you don't."

His voice was strained, a little harsh as he repeated, "Mind?" Then he said lightly, "I'm very chivalrous, so I won't insist on drawing lots for the bed." He opened the bedroom door and withdrew his head sharply with a grimace of horror. "Have you seen the wallpaper? I think that horsehair atrocity is the lesser of two evils."

"Still it is all beautifully clean," she said calmly; "has hot and cold water and a comfortable bed. The French have a flair for hotel keeping. They have an eye for essentials, even if their taste in wallpapers is a trifle—er—highly colored."

She stood in the room, staring with determined calm at the violently orange-and-green parrots that flew and preened through the branches of vermilion trees all over the walls and began to unstrap her case. Michael, lounging against the door, watching her with amused eyes, came forward. "Here, let me do that." She smiled and relinquished the case to him. It was an odd moment of pleasant intimacy, almost as though there was a reality in their strange marriage.

"Last time I came here I was with another fellow, fishing," he said, struggling with the recalcitrant straps. "We brought an old tub of a boat in from Nice, and stayed a week here. We had attic bedrooms, plain white-

washed walls and black beams, enormous feather beds with the sheets smelling of lavender. I was hoping we'd get similar rooms."

"I expect they are quite ashamed of that simplicity and consider this the height of splendor." Veronica picked up her dressing gown and sponge bag, adding, "I'll get bathed first, while you unpack your things."

She went through the sitting room to the bathroom quite nonchalantly, as though Michael's presence did not disturb her in the least, and was surprised to find, the bathroom door closed and bolted between them, that her heart was beating quickly and excitedly. She looked at herself in the mirror over the hand basin and saw that her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brilliant like stars. Suddenly she wanted to be beautiful, beautiful as Michael had never seen her beautiful.

She took time over her bath, setting her dark hair into soft, shining curls, slipping luxuriously into her triple-ninon undies and chiffon thin stockings, carefully dusting her face with powder, lightly touching her lips with crimson, before she wrapped her tailored blue dressing gown about her and went back into the bedroom.

Michael was not there. She stood looking round the room. He had unpacked, and everything was put away with military tidiness; there was no sign of his towel or shaving things. He had obviously taken them and gone to the other bathroom. An odd little shiver passed over her. She closed and bolted the bedroom door and changed into a long-skirted, short-sleeved dress of turquoise-blue chiffon, belted high with a wide silver belt studded with pale blue stones. Suddenly she pressed her hands against her eyes, although they were dry, burning, tearless, and then with a queer, hopeless little gesture against her aching

breast. This was different to anything she had known, different to anything she had ever felt for Alan, to anything she had imagined in her wildest dreams. *Michael* . . . her whole world was encompassed in his name.

He knocked lightly on the door and she opened it quickly. He had changed into a light gray suit, an air-force tie to his blue sports shirt his only pretention to formality, for it would have been pretentious to dress in the quaint little inn. He seemed very tall standing there in the doorway. He held out his hand. "Come along. Something is smelling very appetizingly downstairs." His eyes swept her simple, graceful dress approvingly. "It's lovely. I haven't seen that one before, have I?"

"No." She glanced down at the long slim lines of her skirt. "It seemed very informal, but maybe it's a bit elegant for St Belle-Marie. Shall I put on a cotton or something more simple?"

"Of course not," he protested. "St Belle-Marie should be very honored. They'll think it's in honor of their fete tomorrow."

She laughed and took his proffered arm, and they went downstairs to the dining room where, thankfully, there were no orange-and-green parrots but cool, cream paneled walls and long creeper-hung windows overlooking the harbor and the sea.

Her heart beat in helpless protestation. It was all so unreal. Going down to dinner gaily on his arm, sitting opposite him at table—to all outward seeming a delightfully happy married couple. But she did not know what was in his mind or heart; she did not know what she meant to him, and tonight they seemed curiously far apart. Their talk was brittle and trivial. Michael was being wittier and more amusing than she had ever known him. They drank

wine, a good local wine, and the food, though simple, was excellent. The inevitable omelette, but cooked to perfection, roast chicken, a soufflé. They laughed a lot and talked a lot, but Veronica had a feeling they were both acting in a curiously artificial, unreal, meaningless play. Once or twice, when she looked up quickly from her plate, she would find Michael's eyes on her, intensely, searchingly with a tiny suppressed flame in their clear depth, and her cheeks would become a little brighter, her humor a little more voluble and forced.

After dinner they strolled out into the village to look at the decorations. The streets were hung with bunting from roof to roof and the windows garlanded with flowers for the procession tomorrow. They gathered from the conversation of the townsfolk that it was the feast day of the town's patron saint and also an important civic anniversary. The streets were all crowded with young people, laughing and shouting in the local patios, dark eyes bright, sunburned cheeks aglow, soft southern voices bubbling with laughter. They walked along over the cobbles, hard to Veronica's satin sandals, so that she was glad of Michael's firm hand under her arm, down a street which no vehicle could climb, long shallow steps winding down to the harbor, and along the gray-stone breakwater where the sea softly lapped against the gray sea wall and the fisherboats could be seen like clusters of fireflies a mile or more across the smooth water.

"It's very beautiful," said Veronica. It was quiet there, whispering quiet, but from the excited clatter of the town behind came a sudden drumbeat, swift, exciting, rather frightening.

"Too beautiful," said Michael slowly.

"Can anything be?" she asked.

He looked at her, then abruptly away, saying shortly, "I think so." He paused, his somber eyes on the luminous sea. The sky had the purply gleam of grapes and glittered with stars, like a dark woman with diamonds in her hair. He said quickly, "Shall we go back? You've had a long day, and it's late; you must be tired."

The tears stung hotly beneath her lashes; she turned in silence and walked with him up the steep winding street with its overhanging balconies and clustered houses. At the door he stopped.

"I think I'll have a smoke before I turn in—you go ahead. Is there anything you want? A nightcap? Some coffee?"

She shook her head silently.

"Well, good night. . . ." He made an attempt at lightness. "If you hear awful groans in the night you'll know the horsehair sofa is living up to its appearance."

She went slowly upstairs into their sitting room. The night was hot and airless, with the lemon-scented heat of the south. The windows were wide open, but thin guards of netting had been placed across them, and outside a mosquito zoomed like a miniature plane. She opened the guard and stepped out onto the balcony. Down in the cobbled street below she could hear Michael's footsteps, see the red pin point of his cigarette. As she stood there silently in the shadow of an overhanging vine she heard him pacing restlessly up and down the cobbles below. Then, with an odd, stifled little exclamation, he threw the hardly lit cigarette away and walked quickly in the direction they had come, down the steep cobbled mule steps toward the harbor.

A little breeze stirred her hair and the folds of her gown. Some taut line of endurance stretched to breaking

point within her and snapped. She couldn't go on. She must speak to him; she must tell him she couldn't go on. It was a crazy position, unendurable; they had both been mad to think it possible. But it hadn't seemed mad, not when she had thought her heart chained to Alan. Before she had learned the bittersweet agony of doubt that love could be. She turned away and ran through the room and down the stairs into the street, a lovely, swift figure, her pale dress flowing away from her, like the figures that were carved on Grecian galleys, her hands clasped on her breast.

As she turned the corner in the shadow of a tall white house she came upon him, standing leaning against the wall in a black shadow, a step or so below her.

She stood poised above him, said, softly and strangely, "Michael," and held out her arms like a child that is frightened and longs for comfort. There was a pause, a minute still in time, then he reached up long, hungry arms and pulled her down against his breast.

They did not speak for a moment but stood silently, cheek pressed to cheek, crushed together in the fulfillment of their great need.

"I was so afraid," she whispered presently, "that you didn't want me."

"Want you?" He laughed, his voice suddenly young and eager, his hands as they held her trembling. "From the first minute, Veronica—the first minute I saw you—I thought I could never love again. I had thought all the emotion was drained out of me. I thought I had nothing to give any more, except the casual passion a man can give to a casual woman for a night. But meeting you, seeing you, it was like being born again, can you understand that, Veronica?"

"I know," she murmured. "I know." She raised her lips, soft and tremulous, for his kiss. He crushed her to him in fierce possession, and her heart soared upward to him in glittering stars.

For a moment he held her away from him.

"You're sure, Veronica?" he said, his eyes searching her face. "You're sure? It's not just life—life can be so misleading. My dear, my dearest dear—youth, gratitude, proximity . . . you know, 'love of love, or from heart's loneliness'—I don't want you for that, sweetheart. I want *you*, Veronica, all of you, heart, mind, body, soul. But I don't want an iota that you don't want to give gladly and willingly. I could have made love to you so many times, but I didn't, because I want all of your love, given freely because you love me too."

She drew his face down to hers and said softly, her voice husky with the depth of her feeling, with longing, with surrender, "I love you, Michael, and I am your wife."

He held her close again to his pounding heart.

"It seems so strange, Veronica, as though we have just met, as though we should be married again. As though we have nothing to do with those two doubting strangers who were married, sure of their own hearts but not of each other's."

She said impulsively, "You should really say it first. But I'll begin. I, Veronica, take thee, Michael, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward . . ." Her voice went on in its soft, deep cadence through the marriage vows, those solemn words which in their bleak brevity hold everything a man and woman can promise each other.

He said, "All that is contained in the words I love you,

that is what they mean. Shall I say them now? I, Michael, take thee, Veronica . . .”

Her fingers were across his lips. “You don’t need to say it,” she said. “I can see it in your eyes.” Then, like a whisper, “Take me then, Michael.”

His eyes were very tender, his hand on her hair gentle; she put her head down on his shoulder with a small, trusting movement. He put his arm around her, and they went slowly back up the steep shadowy street toward the hotel. It was very quiet now, not even a breeze stirred the hanging vines and roses on the white walls. Once from a darkened balcony window came a girl’s low laugh—a sea bird called strangely—two tiny splashes of sound in the deep lake of silence. Only their two footsteps going together up the cobbled street.

Chapter Ten

A DAY or two later they traveled on to Marseilles. They crossed to Alexandria by a smallish French steamer—no swimming pool, no palatial restaurant, no crowds of moneyed tourists, but they didn't want anything like that. Their time of dreaming before everyday life claimed them, the service, social duties, people, seemed so short. They wanted it uninterruptedly together, to talk to each other, to discover anew the miracle they had found together, and the small, rather shabby but scrupulously clean ship, with its good French cuisine and incurious passengers of the hardened-traveler type suited them perfectly.

The Juggernaut was swung aboard at Marseilles, up against the blue sky, down into the bowels of the ship, "like one mechanical monster eating a smaller one," Veronica said, and the S.S. Philippe started across a sea like a sheet of blue silk toward Egypt.

Veronica had only seen fighting ships in newsreels or

picture papers, but as they steamed southeast across that exquisite stretch of water, still as a blue lake, flawless azure sky meeting deeper azure sea, she realized the Mediterranean had ousted the Balkans as the cockpit of Europe. But it was not a cockpit; it was a bowl full of fighting fish, gray, lean, turreted guardians of power, deadly armed. A bowl which anyone might carelessly upset and send hell streaming over Europe. She shivered a little as she realized that Michael was part of this guarded preparedness, a guardian of the air. She wished foolishly that he followed some other profession but knew illogically in the same minute that she would not have him different in any way. "Men must work, and women must weep." It might be altered to, "Men must fight . . ." Not always, not forever, she told herself. One had to hope that humanity would one day work out its own salvation. One had to hang onto that belief. And meanwhile there seemed nothing one could do but inwardly pray and hope. She thought of the service people she knew, the women, always so gay, so smart, so ready for the next cocktail party, the next amusement. Going always feverishly through a bright, brilliant round of entertainment. Never allowing themselves to be serious, living in a house of cards that might at any time be pushed over. One had lots of fun so that one shouldn't think about it. There was nothing to do but grin and bear it, to grasp at life, at happiness and love. Veronica was happy, but in her heart already was the unspoken prayer of every soldier's wife, "Peace in our time, oh Lord."

On board they were incredibly, rapturously idle. They sunbathed on the deck, laughed and made love, talked of nothing or of intense, deep realities. They read a lot and talked of the books they had read, said things they

had always wanted to say but had never found the person to whom they could be spoken. Michael read to her from a book of verse he had. One particular poem he had always loved.

*"Though it were long since,
Though it were passed over,
It was romance,
And deathless, my lover . . ."*

"Later on, when we have been at El-Hussar for some time, I'll try and get a decent leave and we'll go up the Nile," Michael said. "You'll understand then, though I suppose that poem could be illustrated anywhere. But particularly in Egypt—Cleopatra's country. They know little of her, Veronica; they really know nothing. The portraits they have of her may be of another queen. They only know she lived, and that two great men loved her, and that she died suddenly, whether for lost love or thwarted ambition they don't know. Shakespeare wrote of her; that is enough to make her deathless. All poets write of her. You remember Rupert Brooke's:

*"Gypsy the lips I kiss, and see
Two Anthonys in your eyes."*

"You see she's romance and deathless. All romance is deathless, my darling, even our small personal one that no one knows about."

"No one?" she said lightly, for the tears were quick to her eyes. "Everyone. We go around with large beaming faces oozing romance."

He ruffled her hair unceremoniously and said severely, "Radiating is so much the nicer word."

The S.S. Philippe called at Valetta and the bumboats

came out, not in such streams as for the large tourist ships, and the baskets were hauled up for the passengers to make purchases. Michael bought Veronica some linen and lace and some barbaric earrings which he callously assured her were four times the price they would be in Oxford Street. She would have liked to have spent a few hours in Malta, but she was impatient now to see Egypt, to see the land in which she would spend the next two years, where she would learn to be Michael's wife. She was eager to see Alexandria, that great sprawling mass of living history, that modern cosmopolitan town built over great Alexander's dreamed-of metropolis, built over so completely that even the tomb of that handsome, brilliant megalomaniac who had given the town his name had never been found.

Michael teased her unmercifully over her eagerness.

"What do you expect to see? 'Quinqueremes from Nineveh?' Greek galleys and the marble Pharos light? It's exactly like the Liverpool or Southampton docks, only a little dirtier if possible."

She slipped her arm through his, eyes smiling up at him. The sun seemed to find golden specks, like hidden amber in their dark, velvet depths.

"I don't believe it. It may be all you say, but the sun gilds everything; nothing looks so bad in the sunshine."

"Sometimes it looks worse. It finds all the shabby bits, like last year's coat on a bright spring day."

"I know that feeling," she said.

Yet Alexandria at first sight both exceeded her expectations and fell short of them. From the sea, with the harbor like a great circular bay stretching out two long arms as though it would draw them into its grasp, with the landmarks of distant minarets and Pompey's granite

pillar shimmering against the sky, it had beauty, the unfolding beauty of the mysterious East. But when the steamer docked, and there were the railway lines, the hideous corrugated iron customs sheds, the coal basin with its carefully stacked black mountains, it was just the grubby, busy, dull side of modern industry.

There were strange patches of color, like scarlet patches on a dull painting. A great air liner, like a huge sleeping gull on the oily blue waters of the marine airport. The Egyptian police in their khaki drill, the scarlet fez throwing their swarthy features and white teeth into brilliant relief. The tiny white dingies of the Boat Club with their scarlet sails, darting between the liners and tramp steamers, manned by brown young Britishers clad for the most part in the grubbiest of grubby shorts and little else.

They took a taxi from the harbor, driving through the packed and narrow streets of the native quarter where every corner building seemed to be a mosque, with its flock of beggars about the steps, and its thin finger of a minaret raised to the sky. There were warehouses, arched alleys, courtyards, little native shops, wider streets with clanging trams, a touch of France rote which even allows trams to clang through the beautiful Parisian streets, a multi-colored crowd, mostly semi-European suits, topped with the ever-present fez, often the loose white clothes and embroidered jacket of a dragoman or donkey boy and occasionally the flowing burnoose and proud hawky face of a Bedouin, a desert man. The taxi wound and darted, hooted, as the driver swore in a mixture of Egyptian and French, and then they were out on the sea front again. This time on a wide white road, with two traffic lines on each side of grass plots, sweeping along past gardens and consular buildings, theaters, restaurants,

cabarets, sweeping along in its great curve by the sea. Along the grass plots stood occasional lines of horse carriages, the *arabanchi*, and Veronica felt it would be very pleasant to drive along this splendid seaside road in the sunshine behind quietly trotting hoofs.

They did not speak much, and Michael watched Veronica's eager eyes and excited, flushed face with a little smile of amusement. She was somehow so young, so eager, like a child that has suddenly discovered life is thrilling and beautiful. And she had made life thrilling and beautiful for him too. He put an arm about her and drew her close to his side.

"Kiss me," he commanded.

"Michael—people will see. Besides, I might miss something."

"Infant," he said tenderly, "you've two years to see it all in." So she kissed him, not once but several times, and forgot about Alexandria, the great white promenade and the wide, gay bathing beaches and saw only Michael—his strong brown face, his blue eyes, the humorous, tender quirk of his mouth corners as he looked at her. She touched his lips gently; her heart was overflowing with happiness.

"Time of dreaming over, Veronica," he said. "We're reporting for duty."

Chapter Eleven

THE CAMP AT EL-HUSSAR was flat, as flat as anything Veronica had ever seen or imagined. It lay behind the fashionable French-English villa and bungalow suburbs that ran along by the sea. A square mile of such perfectly flat land that it looked as though it had been rolled by a gigantic steam roller.

It was separated from the outside world by apparently impassable barbed-wire entanglements, and the officers' bungalows were clustered together in a corner of this dry, dusty square. They were relieved of complete aridity by grass plots running round them, by divisions of cactus hedges, by an occasional and not very flourishing fig tree. Veronica and Michael were lucky. A passion creeper climbed reluctantly up the veranda, and there was a cluster of small, sweet-smelling tobacco plants. Michael called it, sarcastically, the garden city. It stood away from the barracks and the airdrome with its hangers casting a startling black patch of shade in the brilliant sunshine. From nine in the morning to when the bugler

sounded the retreat at six o'clock and everyone except the sentries and the airman of the watch called it a day the Union Jack flapped lazily in the slow sea breeze over the parade ground.

Veronica's married life seemed to be lived to an accompaniment of droning planes, the soft murmur of native voices from her three Egyptian servants and the sound of bugles. The bugles made her laugh; it reminded her of her school days. "Alarrums off. . . . Enter Macbeth and Banquo." The bungalow was white with a wide veranda running all round. Veronica was a little startled to find that under its smooth whiteness the building material was empty petrol cans cemented together with *mutti*, a kind of dried mud which apparently served the purpose of mortar in camp buildings. She was tempted to put this astonishing fact in her first letter home but decided that her mother either wouldn't believe it or, if she did, would insist upon her returning home immediately unless a proper living place could be provided for her.

But the bungalow was pleasant, spotlessly clean with its cool white painted walls. The rooms were large and shaded from the eternal sun glare reflected from the ground outside by its wide veranda, and the original tenants, for like all overseas service bungalows it had passed through many hands, fortunately, had had excellent taste. The furniture was simple, good and comfortable. It needed only the touch of their own rugs, cushions, books and flowers to transform it into a home.

The first night they dined at home—the bungalow was quite ready, beds prepared and an appetizing meal. After the insistent presence of Edie it took Veronica a little while to get used to supervising her three dusky magicians,

who seemed to clean the place with magic immediately her back was turned and vanish with a polite murmur of "Mem'sab . . ." the minute she confronted them.

Michael reported their arrival to the adjutant, and after dinner visitors began to arrive with the most charming casualness to introduce themselves. They were unpacking and arranging their books when the first two came, a very tall, very sunburned man accompanied by a very small woman, rather like a bright-eyed robin perched on a branch, there was such an air of indescribable pertness and daintiness about her. They introduced themselves as Flight Lieutenant Williams and his wife. Williams commanded the flight that Michael would join. Mrs Williams looked with sly approval at Veronica, and her welcoming smile and handshake were encouraging.

"We dropped across to see if we could help." She twinkled up at Veronica. "We hadn't hoped for a beauty to grace our dull community though. By the end of the evening I've no doubt you'll have so much masculine help you won't be able to get settled at all."

Veronica colored a little, and Williams said reassuringly, "Don't worry, Mrs Carson, I'll keep the sharks away."

"Sharks?"

"The bachelor element. Always very tiresome overseas, as you're bound to discover."

"John's so gallant," said his wife wickedly.

He pretended to ignore her, but his eyes suggested that he would remember and have his own back. The Williams were a delightful couple; they seemed to spend their lives in a mutual maliciously good-natured cross talk. Indeed, they were known in the camp as the Variety Turn. Veronica was immediately at her ease.

"But look, can't we do anything or give you any advice?" began Williams.

"There's a really wonderful French milliner opened just along the Corniche Road," interrupted his wife.

"Woman! Have you no mind for anything but clothes?" he said sternly. "I apologize for her, Mrs Carson; she's entirely frivolous."

"We haven't begun to think about unpacking," said Michael. "We're just doing the books. Veronica won't trust anyone else with them."

Mrs Williams looked enviously at the packing cases with the mellow backs of Michael's treasured rare editions. "I should think not," she said. "I suppose you never lend them?"

"Never," said Michael with mock solemnity; "we know too much about lending. How d'you suppose we got all these?"

Two young flying officers dropped in; it was too small a station for much formality. The men were uniformly alike in drill and silk shirts. They were good-looking, charming youngsters and introduced themselves, offered to help, got in the way until drinks were produced which they proceeded to handle skillfully, their eyes openly admiring, fixed on Veronica, golden-skinned in her graceful blue chiffon dress. They stayed determinedly. Another flight lieutenant and his wife, the Averys, arrived. Mrs Avery, a bored blonde ex-debutante who only wanted news of the latest fashions and the latest society scandal, information which Veronica was quite unable to supply. The low white room began to take on the air of an informal party.

"It's going to be fun," Veronica thought. She had a new glow and confidence about her; it was fun to be so

obviously admired when one knew oneself to be loved. With Alan she had never flirted; the attention of another man had always caused painful scenes of unreasonable jealousy. But now with Michael for the first time she could enjoy flirting, lazily and lightly, learning to become expert in this verbal sparring, keeping these good-looking boys in their place, yet enjoying their admiration. And ever and again her eyes would meet Michael's through the cigarette smoke or watch his tall head bending to catch little Mrs Williams' remarks, and she would know herself to be his, safe, secure, beloved.

Presently they had all gone; nothing but the full ash trays, the clutter of bottles and glasses. She sighed and pushed back her cloud of dark hair and dropped down onto Michael's knees where he sat in the deep cane chair, snuggling up against him, a little sleepy, very happy.

"It's going to be nice; they all seem to like me," she said.

He grinned. "Like you! Those fellows will all fall in love with you, I expect. I can see life in the Middle East is going to be very complicated for you, sweetheart."

She kissed his chin idly. "How quiet it is," she said. Then, "That's nonsense, and if anyone did I wouldn't notice it; I'm much too busy being in love with you." She rose and went to the open window, peering through the mosquito netting at the sky. "It's true what you said about the stars being near," she said. "I feel I could touch them." She yawned, stretching with the unself-conscious grace of a kitten or a child. "Let's go to bed, Michael; I'm tired."

He picked her up in his arms easily and carried her through into her bedroom.

Billy's letter came two months later. It was high sum-

mer and very hot. Alexandria was full of wealthy Egyptian families, French and English officials and their wives, migrating from the heat of Cairo, trying to catch an illusion of coolness from the sparkling Mediterranean. One stayed indoors all day and spent long evenings at the Sporting Club beach, yachting, swimming, lounging on the sand or picnicking by moonlight in the lesser-known beaches along the coast. One played tennis early, before the heat of the day closed down like an oven about the arid camp. One thought of green English fields as a starving man thinks of food.

A whistle shrilled somewhere out on the tarmac, and presently Michael came in for breakfast and found Veronica reading it, for it was addressed to them both. She looked cool and slender in her wide navy linen slacks and pale blue crepe-de-chine blouse. She passed it across to him while Ali, the houseboy, served them with fruit and coffee with his accustomed solemn, dark-faced ritual.

The letter said, "We've had a tragedy in our family. Reynolds was killed in a motor smash, and Marta is a widow. She was with him at the time and her nerves are badly shaken. She has no one but me now, so she's coming out with me to Egypt. She'll take a house or bungalow at Bulkeley, to be somewhere near the sea, and I'll live with her. I wouldn't have taken this step, Michael, but that I know from your letters and Verry's that Marta has no power to hurt you now."

Veronica said quietly, "Is it Billy's sister? I've heard him speak of her."

"Yes." Michael looked at the letter, a tiny frown between his brows, as though he were trying to recall a face that had long since dimmed in his memory.

"The—it was she?" Veronica's question remained un-

finished. He folded the letter up and tossed it onto his desk with the others and smiled across at her.

"Yes. It was she who very publicly threw me over to marry Reynolds. I've never told you who the woman was, Veronica; I thought it was unnecessary; it seemed unlikely you would ever meet her. But since she's coming out with Billy it's best that you should know."

"So that's what Billy meant when he said his family owed you some happiness. You remember, when we were married?"

"Yes, and that's probably why he was generous enough to save my life at the risk of his own." He reached across and took her hand, laying it against his lips. "Thank God he did, Veronica."

Ali had gone into the kitchen with his usual, silent-footed unobtrusiveness, and Veronica rose and came behind Michael's chair, linking her arms about his neck, resting her cheek against his short crisp hair. The flies, the incessant flies of Egypt, buzzed angrily in the sunshine outside. The electric fan, churning the heat, purred above their heads. She put her lips against his hair. A queer little doubt had invaded her heart. She was happy; she and Michael had been wonderfully happy in their own small world of tenderness and passion and in the outer world of gaiety and good friends.

They had never, since they had left England, mentioned Alan, the man who had so hurt her, or the unknown woman who had nearly wrecked Michael's life. She had been a shadowy, cruel figure, vanishing into the past, obliterated by their happiness. But now she was a person; she had a name; she was coming to Alexandria.

He glanced up at her, saying, "You're not worrying about it, sweet?"

"N-no." She smiled. "Just an odd sort of feeling."

He turned and pulled her down against him, his eyes clear and steady, burning blue as they had been that first day when she had promised to be his wife.

"Nothing can hurt us, Veronica."

She smiled and kissed him and said quickly, "Nothing." But twenty minutes later, when she stood at the window, looking through the netting, watching his tall figure stride through the sunlight back toward the tarmac, she had a faint feeling of doubt, as though some small shadow of hostility had crept into her bright world.

Chapter Twelve

BILLY LENNARD leaned over the rail as the great white Italian pleasure cruiser steamed gently into the harbor at Alexandria. It was his first glimpse of the East, and he was nearly as excited as Veronica had been five months before. He remembered her letters now, telling him about this thrilling minute, when the minarets began to lift from the horizon into their heaven-reaching finger points, creeping slowly nearer, bringing the babel of tongues and mixture of races that is Alexandria, and one knew at last one had arrived out East!

Veronica! He tried to recall her to mind . . . the thin, rather anxious dark-eyed girl who had so adored Alan Grierson, whom everyone had quite liked but dismissed thoughtlessly as Alan's girl. Alan had treated her badly . . . it must have broken her heart. But looking down into the blue and green glisten of the dirty harbor water, Billy found he could not recall that Veronica . . . only the radiant, shiningly beautiful girl who had married

Michael Carson. Heavens, but she had looked lovely that day! So lovely that the picture of her had crept between him and every other woman he had met since. He had cursed himself for a fool, a blind fool, not noticing her, letting old Carson snap her up like that, for to Billy, with the careless egotism of youth, Michael's thirty-five years seemed middle-aged. In the camp they had said it was rebound, that she was trying to save her pride . . . how could she be in love with him? She hardly knew him. And Michael had never been a lady's man. And yet she had *looked* happy enough that day, far happier than she had ever looked when she had been going with Grierson.

He heard a feminine voice calling him and edged quickly along the deck away from it. It would be half an hour at least before they got ashore. Marta never left him a moment these days. It made him think of the days long ago, when they were kids, when she was a bossy schoolgirl and he was still in kindergarten. He supposed poor Reynolds had come in for some bossing too. He shifted his young shoulders impatiently. He supposed, being his only sister, he ought not to think such things but, frankly, Michael Carson had been well out of *that*!

He mused; his dark blue eyes narrowed, gazing across the narrowing strip of water to the busy, dirty dockside. God, how broken up Michael had been over that business, when she had thrown him up to marry Reynolds . . . that day when he had tried to jump out of the dual-control bus. He'd been drinking, of course, or he'd never have thought of it. And now that was all past, might never have happened, and now he had Veronica. Life was a rum business. And Alan Grierson and Alise getting hitched up with a darn great wedding at Hanover Square, with cohorts of bridesmaids and orchids and gallons of

champagne, and then the whole thing up the spout in less than three months. Alan going off to South America alone; Alise here. His frown deepened.

That was a nuisance. He'd told Marta it might be darned awkward for Michael and Veronica to meet Alise again, but there you are. Women! They'd been to school together, it seemed, years ago and never seen each other since. But, finding each other aboard the S.S. Emanuel, they had practically fallen on each other's necks with delight. Now Alise was going to spend the autumn with them at Bulkeley. Hmm, he *supposed* she'd have a rattling good time. A lovely young grass widow with plenty of money and plenty of expensive clothes. She didn't appeal to him; she was too crisp and hard for all her blonde curls and baby-blue eyes, but he supposed other fellows would fall for her.

Now he, Billy, liked something more feminine, someone rather dark-eyed and very slender, like that dark girl on the dockside waving so frantically at someone on board. He looked at her with interest and animation. She looked stunning in that plain, dazzlingly white linen suit, with her golden tan and that big white shady hat. He wondered vaguely who the lucky devil was she was meeting and then realized with a little shock of surprise that she was waving at him. A sudden wave of emotion gripped him. *Veronica!* It was Veronica! He hung over the side, waving his sun helmet furiously, shouting at the top of his voice: "Verry; I say, Verry, old dear."

Veronica stood laughing up at him. Dear Billy. He was just the same, like a great child somehow. It was good to see him again, so young and good-looking and boyish, waving frantically at her, as though he was afraid she would lose sight of him. She had hoped that Michael would have

been able to come with her to meet him, but he had had to go off on a reconnaissance flight over the desert and was not due in until the evening. They had discussed the matter that morning before he left.

"It's no use trying to avoid Marta Reynolds," Michael had said gravely, "because we can't avoid Billy and don't want to. We service people abroad live too close together to indulge in petty feuds, however bitter past relations might have been."

She had slipped her arm through his, standing on tiptoe to kiss him.

"Is it going to worry you much, Michael, Marta being here?"

He shook his head. "No; how could it? I have you." The simple statement contained such a wealth of meaning. "It may be worrying for her though. Marta was always inclined to be dramatic, to underline everything. I was much younger when she jilted me, or I might have realized that and not been such a damned self-pitying fool."

"Well, I believe in carrying the war straight into the enemy's camp," said Veronica. "I'll take the car and go and meet them. I want to go into town to do some shopping anyway. I'll take Mustapha; he can come back by tram. We're set fair now; we're not having anyone interfering with our happiness."

His blue eyes twinkled in his brown face. They had lost that ice color these days; they seemed to Veronica to reflect the gay sparkling blue of the sea. The East suited Michael. He was a little thinner, but that added to his height and the taut look of strength about him. He slipped his hands under her elbows and lifted her neatly until her face was level with his.

"My most determined Veronica," he said whimsically,

"don't try to control destiny. It doesn't work out. Be humbly grateful for happiness."

He put her down, and she said thoughtlessly, "I'm looking forward to seeing Billy again, aren't you?"

"Yes." Yes, he was glad to be seeing Billy again. He had a great friendship for the boy. He had always liked him, his gaiety, his cool English courage, his susceptible, impressionable nature, even his light-mindedness. Billy had never read a book or entertained a serious thought in his life. He would never get far in the service. He had joined because he adored flying, but his happy-go-lucky nature abhorred the discipline, abhorred enforcing it as much as he rebelled against it himself. It was fortunate that he had plenty of money . . . pretty girls, plenty of sport, plenty of fun, that was all Billy had ever asked from life. He usually got it.

Michael remembered with sudden clarity Veronica's words on their wedding day: "He's like Alan, or rather he's like Alan should have been—what I thought Alan was. Young, gallant, gay, and yet he's honest and brave as well." He remembered the odd little pang of misgiving those words had given him. Somehow they had put Veronica into the world of Billy and Alan, not his world. He was thirty-five; Veronica was twenty-three now, and Billy was twenty-four.

He glanced at his watch and kissed Veronica quickly.

"Good-by, my sweetheart. I'll have to scram."

"What time will you be back?"

"For dinner, I hope. I'll get them to send word to you when we're wired in. Good-by."

At the door he turned and smiled, and for one foolish moment he had a feeling as though their time of perfect happiness was over. As though Marta and Billy with their

memories of old associations and old pain would bring a different, unwelcome influence into their lives; a moment of black premonition, and he thrust it away as being foolish and unworthy. Veronica, sitting at the table, looked up at him with her warm, gold-flecked dark eyes. She rose impulsively and went with him onto the veranda, standing while he walked along the lane between the cactus plants, joining Flight Lieutenant Williams at the corner. They had both turned to wave before they disappeared in the direction of the tarmac. A short while afterward she had heard the roar of engines and saw the three planes rise, silvery and beautiful, into the flawless blue of the sky.

And now she was meeting Billy. It really was quite exciting to see the great white ship edging nearer and Billy hanging over the side like an eager schoolboy, the crowd aboard waving greetings to the crowd ashore. A woman dressed dramatically in black came to Billy's side and questioned him sharply, and he seemed to turn with a hint of irritability to answer her. So that was Marta. That was the woman who had nearly destroyed Michael. Veronica looked at her curiously, the wreck of a beauty. She was older than Billy. About twenty-nine or thirty, a woman who had taken too much out of life to remain young. She was slim and graceful, but her fair, almost classically lovely face was lined, ravaged by exaggerated suffering. Veronica realized the truth of Michael's words; everything about her would be overdone, underlined. Her black clothes, the black chiffon turban wound, Arab fashion, round her pale, centered hair, it all seemed part of a role she was playing rather than a genuine expression of grief. As she watched, Veronica saw her turn to a slim fair girl in blue and draw her attention to the dockside. They were obviously talking about her.

The fair girl came forward a little, and with a cold shock of surprise Veronica recognized Alise.

Memory swept down on her like a black wave. That night at the officers' mess at Seadon, Alise in her silver dress . . . Alan . . . and the one sane, steady thing—Michael's strong hand on her arm, the sympathy and understanding in his deep voice. She put her hand up swiftly to her white linen sleeve, almost as though his hand were there, as though she could meet the grasp of those strong, sensitive fingers. "Michael," her mind whispered, "thank you for that, my darling." A moment later the gangway had been lowered and she had climbed up on deck to be enveloped in a bearlike hug from Billy.

"Verry, how good to see you! And how gorgeous you look. What have you been doing with yourself?"

She disengaged herself laughingly, putting her hat straight.

"Oh, Billy. You are absurd and not very flattering. One would imagine I always looked a sight at home. Michael couldn't come with me. He sends his apologies."

"I'm darn glad he didn't come," said Billy with mock ardor. "He needn't think he can have you all to himself just because he had the sense to snap you up from under our noses."

Veronica cut in gently, indicating his sister who stood near, waiting with a vaguely aggrieved air for his enthusiastic greeting to die down, to be introduced to Veronica, and Alise, who perfectly composed, immediately came forward.

"Hallo, how are you?" Her glance swept Veronica from head to foot, taking in the immaculate grooming, the beautifully cut linen suit, the exquisite, white-shod, slender feet. This was no inexperienced country young

lady she had to deal with now. This was a woman, cosmopolitan, polished, assured and with that look deep down in her dark eyes that only comes to women who are well loved. "I expect you remember me."

Veronica's soft red lips gave the tiniest grimace at the unconscious irony. "Very well. Too well, I'm afraid," she said frankly.

Alise smiled charmingly. She was still the slender, golden-haired bit of nonsense, with a steel bar for a soul, but she could be amusing and charming when she chose. She recognized Veronica's position of good looks and popularity and realized that if she was to enjoy Alexandria she had better be friends—on the surface anyway. "You were well out of that, my dear," she said airily, as airily as though she was discussing a new dressmaker whom she was disappointed in. "I was the fool. Although, of course, Alan is attractive. The whole business was quite, quite impossible. He's gone to South America."

"I'm sorry," said Veronica, a little embarrassed.

Alise looked at her a little strangely, a verse that she had read years ago running malignantly through her head.

*But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine.*

Veronica had been her Cynara . . . Alan's Cynara . . . her shadow had fallen between them even on their wedding night. She had found that one could steal a man's mind and senses away from the woman he loved but not his heart.

"You've made a greater success of your marriage than we did," said Alise. Veronica flushed a little. She had never learned to control that swift, lovely color of hers, and this extremely personal talk embarrassed her.

"I'm very happy," she said quietly.

"And very lucky," said Marta Reynolds suddenly, and there was a silence. Veronica sighed. She could see that Marta was going to be difficult, and she felt sure her self-dramatizing would not be popular among the carefree service people among whom she had come to live.

She said with swift tact, "Billy, you haven't introduced me to your sister."

"Oh yes; sorry. Marta, this is Michael's wife, Veronica."

Marta bowed unsmilingly.

"We've still got the Juggernaut," Veronica said quickly; "may I run you home? I could take you on to the camp if you like, Billy. You'll want to report to the adjutant, won't you? And you'll meet some of the officers, then——"

Marta said quickly, "Billy won't leave me on my first night abroad."

Billy said irritably, "You have Alise. And no one will kidnap you. I have to go to camp anyway, Marta, and I'd be grateful if Veronica could run me out there. Then I'd be back for dinner."

Marta hesitated; her lips folded into a thin, hurt line. Veronica sighed inwardly. He had hurt her with his brusqueness yet she herself had caused it. Billy was neither the type nor the age to appreciate this possessive, maternal affection. It was obvious that his sister had been getting thoroughly on his nerves during the voyage out. She tried to pour oil on the slightly troubled waters by suggesting that they should all drive out to the camp with her and have drinks while Billy reported his arrival, and then she would drive them all back to the villa Marta had taken in Bulkeley.

Alise, scenting a good time with plenty of admiring

young officers, agreed heartily. "Oh yes. That 'll be fun. Do let's, Marta."

"That settles everyone," said Billy with relief. He slipped his arm through Marta's, smiling a boyish apology for his irritation. "How about it, old girl?"

But Marta withdrew her arm coldly. "Thank you, but I know when I'm not wanted. I'm getting used to it these days. We can take a taxi to Bulkeley."

"Oh, please." Veronica's warm voice sounded distressed. In Marta's touchiness, her dramatic mourning, her too-early lined and ravaged face she could see the havoc unstrung nerves had caused. It was obvious that she needed very special consideration, and Veronica was sorry for her. A gay, selfish, good-looking, popular young flying officer was obviously the last person to handle such a case, for it was obvious to the shrewd observer that Marta Reynolds was very nearly "a case." "I sent my bearer back by tram especially to have an empty car to run you back. I'll take you to Bulkeley, and Billy can come over later. Come along." She touched Marta's arm with a friendly gesture and was touched to see her pale blue eyes suddenly flood with tears. Poor thing. Veronica really was sorry for her. Carefully she managed to get Alise next to her in the front by the driver's seat and Billy, sulky but acquiescent, with his sister in the back. They had arranged for the luggage to be sent on.

All the way Alise chattered in her shrewd, bright manner. She was horrified as they went through the native quarters that clustered round the docks. Apparently her worst fears about the East had been realized, and she imagined she would have to live in one of the tiny evil-smelling courts that clustered off the narrow shawari or streets. Her delighted surprise when they came out on the

Promenade de La Reine Nazali and sped on toward the Corniche Road; the famous Shari El Corniche with its fashionable buildings, hotels, banks, shops and cabarets was almost laughable. She had apparently not changed at all. Egypt as Egypt meant nothing to her, its mystery, its beauty, the splendor of its past. But she was insatiably curious about the camp at El-Hussar. How many unmarried officers were there? How many married? Were the wives attractive or stuffy? Had they any money? Did Veronica have a good time? Plenty of parties? And so on and so on, trying to find out exactly what sort of society she was going to join and just where it would be most amusing and profitable to display her famous charm.

"You can imagine how surprised I was to meet Marta on the Emanuel," she said gaily. "I was at school with her, you know. She changed terribly. She used to be such a handsome, strong-minded girl, ruling everyone with a rod of iron. All we juniors went in fear and adoration of her."

Veronica thought that Marta hadn't changed very much. Her present state of mind was probably because she had no one to rule and no one to stand in fear or adoration. She suddenly saw her as she must have been when Michael had loved her, an imperious queenly beauty.

Alise went on, "And fancy her being the one who threw Michael over. She told me all about it. She says Reynolds', that was her husband, death was her punishment. She says she owes Michael a debt that she must repay."

Veronica glanced at her and said involuntarily, "Oh dear," and Alise laughed, an easy, friendly laugh which drew Veronica to her in spite of the ghost of their mutual dislike.

"I *know*. It would be so much better if she forgot all about it. But really, Veronica—you don't *mind* if I call

you Veronica, do you?—I really think she is a little bit touched.”

“Poor thing,” Veronica said quietly. She thought—supposing anything should happen to Michael as it had to Marta’s husband? Anything sudden and violent—final. She thought of him now, a silver speck somewhere in the blue Egyptian sky, and wanted desperately to get rid of these people, to go back to camp to await the news that he had come. She turned and caught Alise’s eyes watching her, baby-blue eyes, expressionless as blue turquoises, and had a moment of queer doubt. She had not expected to see Alise but, finding her with Billy and his sister, had determined not to think of past hurts. Life was difficult enough in such a limited community. On the surface, at least, unassuming friendliness was necessary, and it had seemed that Alise had been only too willing to meet her, and then she had turned and caught those cold, pretty eyes looking at her and realized she knew nothing about this girl except that she could be carelessly cruel—perhaps no one knew her. She had never displayed any affection toward anyone; perhaps she had none.

All Veronica’s instinct toward friendliness suddenly panicked away. She was happy; she was content. And once before Alise had trampled with deliberate cruelty upon her happiness. She had a feeling of wanting to throw up barriers against the other girl, of wanting to keep her away from everything, her home, her friends, Michael, of keeping her out. She did not realize they were emotional opposites, as opposed as the positive and negative of electricity. Alise was self-centered, cool, deciding what she wanted and going after it always, ruled by her senses and her shrewd little mind, never by her heart. Veronica was all woman, generous, emotional, sympathetic, thinking of

others, caring for others, her very beauty and new assured elegance a reflection of her love, a tribute to the man she loved. And Alise had wanted Alan. More than anything in the world she had wanted him, and she had thought she had won, thought so until she realized that the memory of Veronica's sweetness, her tenderness, her unswerving loyalties would always come between them.

The moment passed and they drew up before the pretty little villa that had been rented for Marta. The agent who had secured it for her was there to meet them, to give her the keys and inventory; it was furnished in readiness, the servants installed. Billy got out of the car and helped his sister and Alise to get down and turned to Veronica. She shook her head and smiled.

"I don't quite know when Michael will be in, so I'd like to get back," she said. "But look, I'd like you all to come over tomorrow for lunch. It's cooler now, so we can play tennis during the afternoon. The C.O.'s fixed up a tennis party; he's entertaining some big Egyptian official. The Emir Mohammed es Safadi and his Wazir and attendant sheiks. It seems he played tennis with Michael at the Sporting Club and is coming for his revenge. He's lunching with the C.O. and we're all playing tennis afterward. I think it will be fun. Please do come."

"I don't think——" began Marta doubtfully, glancing at her mourning, but Veronica said, "*Please*. You needn't play if you don't wish. I'm an awful rabbit myself, so we'll just sit quietly on the veranda and be rude about everyone else's play."

Her smile was so warm and friendly that Marta melted and agreed to come, something in the manner of an exiled queen consenting to grace a state occasion. She and Alise went up into the house, a gay little white villa with a tiny

garden planted with small palms and sweet-scented lemon trees; its windows overlooked the brilliant, dancing blue of the Mediterranean. Billy turned back to Veronica.

"Thank you," he said, "for being so sweet to her."

Veronica switched on the Juggernaut's engine and smiled.

"Oh, nonsense. She won't be like that long. Not in Alexandria. People are friendly here. After she's gone about a little and had plenty of attention paid her she'll be quite different. She's been alone with her grief too long."

"She's made a fetish of it," said Billy impatiently. He leaned on the car, his foot on the running board with obviously no intention of following them into the house. Veronica's foot revved up the engine determinedly. She was too accustomed, after five months in the East, to charming young officers who were only too willing to waste her time with light flirtation and pretty compliments to take much notice. "Veronica, I can't get over the change in you. Why, you're—exquisite. Michael's a lucky devil."

"Billy," she remonstrated, "you have the fever already."

"What fever?"

"Romance. It attacks all young unmarried officers as soon as they set foot in Egypt."

His face darkened. "Don't tease, Verry," he said jealously. "I suppose you're used to all the fellows making love to you."

She laughed aloud. "Only one, I'm afraid. You forget I'm a staid married woman now, Billy."

"Verry, why hadn't I the sense to grab you instead of Michael?"

"Billy, don't be absurd. I must go. Three extra to lunch tomorrow. I must break the news to Mustapha; it's likely

to cause an international situation. Good-by." She pressed her foot on the accelerator and the Juggernaut slid forward, so that Billy had to spring back onto the pavement. She waved to him with gay affection. He stood grasping his curly hair with mock despair as she turned the corner and swung the car in the direction of El-Hussar. She glanced up at the house as she did so and saw that one of the upstairs shutters, usually closed against the sun glare during the day, was open and that Marta was watching them. Her tired white face and strained eyes seemed a little out of place in that gay little villa by the sparkling blue sea.

She drove quickly back to the camp, a tiny feeling of depression assailing her. For the first time since she had come to El-Hussar she felt weary and dispirited. She had thought it would be pleasant for Michael and herself to have Billy out there, someone they both knew and were fond of, a friend from home. She had anticipated a little difficulty, a little strangeness with Marta, but not this strained neurosis, this suspicion. She entered the camp and pulled the car up in the space between the cactus hedges next to the bungalow and went in, into the cool, white lounge, its shutters closed against the sun glare, and dropped down onto the divan, pulling off her gloves and hat dispiritedly, curling up her legs beneath her. Then there was *Alise*. . . . She pushed back her hair a little wearily and reached for a cigarette. Ali appeared as though by magic in his floppy white clothes, his solemn round dark face regarding her, sensing her weariness and depression like a faithful dog.

"For the Sahiba, tea?" he asked.

"Oh, please, Ali. Has any message come from Sahib Carson yet?"

Ali shook his head solemnly. There was the faintest glint

in his dark eyes. He went and returned with tea in an incredibly short time and set it on a small table beside her. There were two cups. She looked up, puzzled, and an enormous sheaf of passion flowers and small pinky-purple orchids fell in her lap; instead of Ali's dark face she was looking up into Michael's amused blue eyes.

She sprang up, her depression forgotten.

"Michael, you wretch! Conspiring with the servants to deceive me now! When did you get in?"

He dropped down beside her, drawing her against him.

"An hour ago. We ran into a gibli over the desert. We were on a photograph survey and, of course, it was impossible, so Williams called it a day. Loud cheers for the desert sand! Pour me out some tea, darling. No, kiss me first and then tell me what you've been up to."

There was an interlude while the tea cooled and Veronica lay, breathless and happy, in his arms. She wondered foolishly if every pilot's wife had this blissful relief at his return. Even now, after five months, something within her was suspended and anxious all the time he was away. Presently she sat up, tidied her hair and poured out the tea. Michael sprawled out on the cushions, a big, masculine figure in his uniform, his brown face and hands a little begrimed with dust from the storm they had flown through, his eyes ringed by goggle marks and showing signs of strain from desert flying. He watched her, the smooth deft movements of her hands among the tea-things, the tiny frown between her brows.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?"

A big hand caught her and pulled her down against him, her head against his chest. She could feel his body through his thin shirt, warm and hard.

"Don't prevaricate. What's upset you?"

She shrugged, sat up again and gave him his tea.

"Alise Cheam, I mean Alise Grierson, is with Mrs Reynolds. Alan has left her."

"That can't hurt you now, Veronica," he said gently.

She loved the way he said her name. He of all the people she knew had never called her Verry. She smiled, that swift, intimate smile which she had for him alone, which still had the power to shake him with its revealing beauty.

"I know. It was a little disturbing though."

"That's not all?"

"No. Mrs Reynolds, she's rather terrible, Michael. She's gone completely to pieces. I'm afraid she won't fit in here. It's going to be difficult."

"Difficult?"

It was *difficult* to explain, even to Michael, how that stark white face and those distraught eyes watching her and Billy had upset her, as though—yes, as though there could be something serious in his fooling. She gave it up.

"Perhaps she'll settle down—if people are friendly."

"And how's Billy?"

Her face lit up. "Oh, he's just the same. Lots of fun. I'm afraid he finds his sister a little trying." She turned quickly. "We *must* be nice to her, Michael. I'm sure she needs a lot of understanding and sympathy."

He laughed. "And my Veronica with her 'there-but-for-the-Grace-of-God' creed has taken it very much to heart." He sat up, drank his tea and said solemnly, "Now I'll tell you something. Shut your eyes and hold your breath." She obeyed and he kissed her. Her eyes flew open.

"Is that all?"

"No. *Leave!*"

"Really, Michael?" Her eyes lit up, and her cheeks flushed with delight. "How long?"

"Twenty days. And that means——"

"Thebes," she said delightedly.

"And the Valley of Kings and Luxor."

"Any farther?"

"No. I'm afraid we'll have to leave Abou-Simbel and the second cataract for another time. Will nothing satisfy you, woman?"

"Satisfy! Oh, Michael!" She rose to her feet, thrilled, excited. They had planned and dreamed about it so long, this trip up the Nile together. "When do we start?"

"On Wednesday. I'll book our passages tomorrow."

"Oh, tomorrow there's the C.O.'s tennis party, and I've asked Billy and his sister and Alise for lunch. The Williams are coming too." Her voice sank with a touch of impatience. "Oh dear, I wish they weren't coming. I can't bear to wait another day before we get it all fixed up. Oh, Michael, I'm thrilled!"

He laughed at her enthusiasm; it was one of the many things about her that he loved. Veronica would never be blasé or bored; the world was everlastingly wonderful to her, forever opening up fresh vistas of wonder and beauty.

"You're thrilled," he said. "Now listen to this. With my usual efficiency and ingenuity I've arranged a special full moon for that week. The Temple of Karnak is something by moonlight, I've been told."

"How clever of you, Michael," she teased, then frowned again. "I do wish that wretched tennis party wasn't tomorrow. I've got an awful feeling something is going to interfere with our lovely trip."

"I'll go down tonight if you like. I can take the Jugger-naut. The booking office doesn't close until seven."

"We haven't time; we're dining with the Averys."

"Well, then tomorrow, as soon as the tennis people go. We'll take the car and go together before dinner and book our passages. There, will that satisfy you?"

"Yes," she said slowly. She could not explain this feeling she had. She wished she and Michael could run away; she had such a sense of doubt and fear. She sighed, picked up the flowers he had brought her. She had forgotten them in her excitement, and they were already losing their freshness in the heat. "Come along," she said; "we must dress. I'll get Ali to fix some drinks."

Chapter Thirteen

THE CAMP was well equipped for tennis. A long changing room with a wide veranda overlooked the courts, so that those not playing could sit in the shade and consume cooling drinks, while the more energetic sped to and fro in the sunshine.

Veronica had not dressed for tennis. The C.O., once an ardent Wimbledon fan, had organized his party into a tournament, and Veronica knew the weakness of her game too well to try and compete. She wore a dress of crisp pale pink linen with short sleeves and a big white hat, a trim contrast to Alise, rather overfluffy in a floral garden-party chiffon and a beflowered hat, and her other guest, Marta Reynolds, who had lightened her mourning with some violet tulle about her shoulders and a large hat with a crown of Parma violets. She looked quite effective, dignified, tragic and aloof. No one was allowed to escape the fact of her loss and ever-present grief. The Williamses gave each other one glance after they had been introduced, labeling her mentally Lady Macbeth. She sat now

with Veronica, watching the Emir and Michael battling grimly on the court below.

The Egyptian played in the French style with brilliancy and tricks and graceful wizardry, leaping for apparently unplayable shots, endeavoring to lure his opponent into mistakes. Michael played as one would expect him to play, a conventional English-American game. From the back line, hard, smashing, wearing volleys, never moving unnecessarily, relying on the accuracy of his eye and the control and incredible speed of his fine body. The C.O. stood near Veronica, a picture of delight. Exiled from his beloved Wimbledon, he was in his element.

"Your husband measures up to Wimbledon standard this afternoon," he said to Veronica.

Marta said quickly, before Veronica could reply, "Michael always played first-class tennis. He did reach the semifinals once."

Squadron Leader Crichton looked at her and looked away. He was a bachelor and disliked above all things women who dramatized themselves. He was sorry for that nice young Lennard, having to drag this odd female about with him.

"The Emir is excellent," he said a little grudgingly; "a little fancy, though. Carson's got him on the run. A nice fellow." He glanced about to make sure the Emir's Wazir and the dark-faced sheiks who formed a little court about him were out of hearing. "A very nice fellow, but embarrassingly overgenerous. Probably want to give your husband an Arab horse or a string of pearls if he wins, Mrs Carson. And it wouldn't be policy to refuse. Oh, well played, well played, Carson. Game and set! Did you see that?" He went down the steps, beaming, to congratulate the winner.

They came up the steps together, Michael mopping his head, looking up to meet Veronica's eyes and receive her little smile of congratulation. Billy Lennard was hanging over her, determinedly occupying her attention in deliberate competition with another young officer. She was smiling and laughing with them, but as he came up the steps she rose at once to greet him. He turned to his opponent and introduced her. "May I present my wife, sir?"

The grave Egyptian bowed. Although he was the loser he looked immeasurably cool. Not a hair of his smooth dark hair was out of place, not a speck of dust on his faultlessly creased flannels or silken shirt.

"I am delighted," he said. He turned to Michael. "I would like you to accept something to commemorate this victory, Mr Carson. It is the second time you have defeated me. It is indeed a pleasure to lose to such an excellent player."

Michael laughed. Veronica thought how good he looked, tall, fair English giant, standing next to the dark Egyptian. "There's nothing in the world that I want except tea at the moment, sir," he said.

They went up the veranda steps to join the rest of the party. Tea was already being served at the small tables. The service people and a few civilians, the men in their white, the colored dresses of the women, the grave-faced Wazir and sheiks in attendance on the Emir, with their inevitable and incongruous fez worn above their impeccable English clothes. Even in the flat, uninteresting camp scenery it made a brilliant picture in the blazing afternoon sunshine.

"Where are you spending your leave, Carson?" asked Flight Lieutenant Williams.

"We're doing the Nile trip, as far as Assuan," said Michael. "Veronica has never seen Luxor."

"I'm terribly excited," said Veronica, and her voice was that of an excited small girl.

"My dear, it's too terribly boring," said the blonde and blasé Mrs Avery. "Just like the second act from *Aïda*, only more so."

Williams began to sing the "Celeste Aïda," very flat, and under the general groans and laughter Billy whispered reproachfully:

"You didn't tell me you were going away."

Veronica pretended not to hear. Billy had been worrying this afternoon. She had been used to casual flirting and gay pretense of devotion from the younger officers, but Billy had a note of seriousness in his tones. Because he knew her so well, had known her before she was married, he tried to establish a priority in her company. She did hope he wasn't going to be foolish. She had laughingly talked of the romantic fever of Egypt . . . but in a way it was true. Something about it, the rare, fine air, the nearness of the stars, the dearth of pretty white women, it seemed easy for a man to make a fool of himself. She had had to be very firm and very tactful more than once. But Billy was their friend; he had been best man when they were married . . . she didn't want him to spoil that friendship with nonsense. And there was Marta; Marta watched him as though Billy were the last thing left to her and every woman was her potential enemy . . . watched him hanging round Veronica and did not understand.

She was grateful when the Emir spoke again, claiming their attention.

"If you're making the Nile trip, Mr Carson, I can be

of use to you," he said. "I would be delighted if you'd make the trip in my boat, the Nefertari. . . ."

"I couldn't think," began Michael easily and caught the C.O.'s eye and finished up a little reluctantly, "I'm afraid it would be far too large for my wife and I. . . ."

"Nonsense . . . why not a party of you?" He spoke with faultless English and the faint inborn authority of one who has been looked on as the chosen of Allah ever since he could stagger round the harem floor. "She sleeps eight and is built on conventional dahabeah lines despite her engines. I am leaving for Paris tomorrow. It would make no difference to me to instruct the crew to stay on board for another fourteen or twenty days . . . they would be at your command," he smiled, showing his perfect white teeth. "You would see the Nile as it should be seen then and take your time . . . and perhaps it will mean more to Mrs Carson then"—he bowed with pointed irony in the direction of Mrs Avery—"the second act of *Aïda*. . . ."

"Why, that's a marvelous offer, Carson," said the C.O. heartily. "Take a party. Only wish I could come with you. . . ."

Michael and Veronica glanced at each other with amused exasperation. They both knew there would be more privacy aboard a Nile steamer among strangers than on the luxurious Nefertari among a party of their own friends. Veronica felt rebellious. She didn't want to go with a party. She wanted to go alone with Michael . . . just the two of them. And yet she had felt all day that their planned and longed-for trip would somehow be spoiled. It was impossible to refuse the offer . . . with as much grace as possible Michael accepted.

"I am delighted," said the Emir. "If you will just let

me know in advance how many will be in your party and when you would like to start so my steward can be adequately provisioned."

"I only wish I could have beaten you at tennis, sir," said Williams laughingly, "the day before I was married. I can't think of a more pleasant honeymoon. . . ."

Before the afternoon was over the party had been planned. It seemed to be taken out of their hands entirely. Billy would go; he was their personal friend, and as he had not yet taken up his duties in the camp he could be spared. Marta, Alise, a young flying officer called Martin who was some relation of the C.O.'s, and the Williamses . . . that completed the party of eight. Everyone else was consumed with jealousy. Mrs Avery was wishing she hadn't made witticisms at the expense of the Luxor ruins. "My dear," she said to Veronica, "I believe it's the last word in luxury . . . a little floating palace. Imagine drifting along in the moonlight, wearing your very smartest evening dress. . . ."

Veronica smiled a little ruefully. She had imagined drifting along in the moonlight . . . but not quite under such circumstances. She had imagined herself and Michael, herself as thrilled as any green tourist, holding Michael's hand . . . listening to the everlasting clack of the *sakiebs* on the banks . . . standing in the bows of the steamer at sunset, watching the huge pylons of Karnak come into view and then the colonnades of the Temple of Luxor. But now they were in the position of hosts . . . they would have to amuse their friends; they would have to plan each day's itinerary. Veronica should have been overwhelmed with pleasure, but she felt more like crying. Billy didn't improve the situation by being silent and

morose all afternoon and devoting himself to Alise, who mocked him lightly about his ill temper.

"You're quite a case over our Veronica," she said. "What has she that other women haven't?"

"Honesty," he said a little brutally.

"I wonder," she mused, "if there is an honest woman in the world. After all, you and I know she made use of Carson . . . married him on the rebound!"

He looked up sharply without answering. At one time he would have been hot in Veronica's defense, but now the words seemed to bring her down to his level . . . justify his sudden infatuation. For there was a grain of truth in them. She hadn't loved Michael when they were married. He looked across at her, listening with gracious tact and charm to the Emir's learned discourse on archaeology. She seemed tired and wan and very young. He felt that he had behaved badly and felt remorseful and ashamed of himself. Later, when they were leaving, he managed to get her to himself.

"I'm sorry I was such a beast, Verry," he said and was surprised by the way in which her face lightened and that her eyes were suddenly full of relieved tears. His pulses raced madly . . . she did care what he did then? She had noticed him.

"That's all right, Billy," she said. "It's been a difficult afternoon."

"Say you're glad I'm coming," he insisted.

"Of course," she said thoughtlessly. "Of course I'm glad. . . ."

She hadn't wanted anyone but Michael . . . but since things had fallen out this way and Billy was coming she was glad that he was going to be his old gay self and not be foolish. She had no idea of the emotion her words

roused in him and was astounded when he caught her hand with an incoherent murmur and raised it to his lips.

They were on the veranda of the bungalow . . . the Emir had left in his sleek Rolls-Royce, and the others had separated to their various bungalows. Michael was just pouring out their own guests a drink before they departed. He called to her and came out onto the veranda, and she pulled her hand away guiltily in some confusion. She met the faint surprise in Michael's eyes and tried to carry the absurd scene off, but she was too weary and disappointed to make much of an effort.

"Billy's feeling romantic," she said in a curiously unreal voice. "Pour him a drink, Michael. . . ."

Michael's deep, even voice was like a draught of iced water, its slight ring of command bringing the situation back to normal.

"Come along, my lad. . . ." he said easily. Veronica looked at him appealingly. She wished desperately that all her guests would go so that she and Michael could be alone together. She had a foolish longing to cry, so he could hold her close and comfort her. She felt his arm about her shoulder as he said quickly, "You look all in, darling. . . . You go and rest . . . I'll push them off. . . ."

She threw him a grateful glance. Billy, intercepting it, seeing in spite of himself its warmth of understanding and intimacy, turned furiously away. He had been a fool. He might have done what Carson had done for her . . . he might have had her trust and her gratitude . . . that lovely glance might have been for him. A sudden wave of fury rose within him . . . it was sheer luck that Carson had been before him. But it wasn't right. A girl like Veronica should have been swept off her feet, not won

with gratitude. Michael's light touch on his arm roused him . . . Veronica had gone in. He looked into the other man's eyes with a touch of guilt, a little impatience . . . it was odd that he should feel like this about Michael whom he knew so well. Whom he had once pitied so deeply, whose life he had saved. He had always liked Michael . . . there had been a deep friendship and, in spite of the difference of their ages, a great deal of understanding between them. It seemed to Billy now that they were strangers . . . almost enemies.

"What about a drink?" asked Michael.

"No, thanks, old man. Get those two women of mine out, and we'll trek for home. . . ."

"I've scarcely had time to speak to you since you arrived," said Michael quietly. "I'm glad you're here, Billy. It's good to have one's friends about one. . . ."

A dull flush crept up Billy's neck . . . he resented bitterly that appeal to his friendship. He said, trying to take the edge off his sarcasm with the lightness of his tone, "Well, I'll expect we'll have plenty of time to get on each other's nerves. You didn't want me on that Nile trip, did you?"

If he had expected Michael to deny it he was disappointed. He said quietly, "We didn't want anyone. Veronica and I have planned that trip together for months. But it seems diplomatic to accept the Emir's offer, and if Allah wills it so we're naturally glad it's you and not a stranger who is coming with us. . . ."

Billy said suddenly, disarmed by Michael's honesty, "Sorry if I've been a boor, Mick. . . . I don't think I'm used to the heat yet."

"That's all right. Come along and have a drink."

It was half an hour later before they all went, Billy,

after several cocktails, in a riotously gay mood. Michael went through the bungalow and tapped on Veronica's door. She said quickly, "Come in, darling. . . ." She was lying on her bed, wrapped in a thin satin negligee . . . he parted the transparent mosquito curtains and saw there were tears on her lashes. He dropped down on the bed beside her and took her in his arms. He put his lips against her hair and said gently, "You don't have to worry because one more young man has fallen in love with you."

She smiled a little mistily, mopping her tears on his silk shirt. "It isn't that really . . . it's our lovely, lovely trip . . ."

"It can't be helped, darling. England expects, you know. We'll make the best of it . . . we'll get our moments together."

She slipped her arm under his neck and drew his head down into its accustomed place in the perfumed curve of her neck. He turned his lips against her soft, scented warmth.

"With the others," she said irrelevantly, "Martin and the rest, it didn't matter. But Billy's our friend . . . why should he choose to behave like an idiot?"

She could feel the quick intake of his breath as he laughed.

"It may be damned awkward, sweet my sweet, but I can't agree that it is idiotic to fall in love with you. Otherwise I must be the prizest of prize idiots. . . ." They laughed together, slipping back into the peace of their love for each other. Then he said: "You're fond of him, aren't you?"

"Yes. He's so much part of the old life. I've been to so many parties where Billy has been. You know the sort of thing, hunting . . . local dances, foursomes for

the movies or dinner in town. . . . I'd go with Alan and Billy would bring another girl. He's . . . he's part of my youth somehow. . . ."

Michael rose and turned away, picking up one of her ivory-backed brushes, idly smoothing his hair, his level eyes watching his reflection expressionlessly, as though he did not see it. Something in his face caught at her heart. She sat up and caught his hand. "You understand, don't you, dearest . . . ?"

He smiled reassurance, but her words had been like a queer little stab in his heart.

"Of course"—he bent to kiss her again—"but I'm damned jealous all the same . . . I'd have liked to have shared that part of your life, too, Veronica. . . ."

She caught his hand to her breast. "Oh, why are we so sad and serious today? What has happened? Haven't we enough, Michael? Enough and spilling over? Haven't these last months together been better than anything anyone could have . . . better than anything either of us dreamed of?"

"You know they have. . . ." he said huskily and bent to take her in his arms. They were back in the beauty of the life they had built together, their splendid, passionate friendship. Yet for the first time the smooth lake of their happiness had been ruffled, as though by an approaching storm. A cloud, tiny but ominous, had appeared on their cloudless skies.

They went to dine with the Williamses that night. There were just the four of them . . . as usual it was fun. As usual they played childish card games and laughed a lot . . . as usual Williams paid extravagant and flowery compliments to Veronica's delicate beauty . . . as usual his tiny, pert wife displayed an entirely artificial and very

amusing jealousy. It seemed as though the incident of the afternoon had never happened. Mrs Williams was inclined to be witty and slightly catty about Marta's dignified gloom.

"I shall adore seeing John escorting her round the Tombs of the Dead Kings," she said.

Yet in spite of this careless gaiety Michael found that little phrase returning: "He's part of my youth . . ." and then, ironically, his own words that magic night at St Belle-Marie: "I want all of you, because you love me too . . . not from love of love or from heart's loneliness. . . ." Veronica was young; she had been alone with him and grateful . . . he thrust the thought from him and cursed himself for a doubting fool. Perhaps they were both a little unstrung after the long hot summer. They had both been bitterly disappointed that afternoon that their longed-for trip should be turned into a party. . . . But all his logic and explanation could not kill that little phrase, "Part of my youth . . . part of my youth. . . ."

Chapter Fourteen

THE NEFERTARI was certainly the last word in luxury; a floating palace, beautifully built in the traditional dahabeah manner, reminiscent somehow of the rock paintings in the tombs they saw, paintings of ancient Nile scenes long ago, the changeless eternal Nile with its *sakiehs* or water wheels softly clacking, with its fellahin moving with patient industry in the ageless agriculture that stirred its banks. One could lie on the deck under the great green awning, watching the women beating their washing in the shallows, the patiently plodding oxen turning a *sakieb*, the humble donkey with its master riding high above his baggage, his wife, with perhaps a baby or a huge bundle on her back, perhaps both, plodding behind. Endless silhouette of changeless beauty, of patient industry, of sails wheeling on the great river, only the tourist steamers chuffing by to indicate that somewhere the world had changed.

The Nefertari had every possible comfort and convenience, and a silent-footed, white-clothed, faultlessly

efficient crew. The comfortable cabins were equipped with shining porcelain bathrooms; the kitchen was like a miniature kitchen in a first-class hotel; the chef, the only European member of the crew, was highly talented. Yet with its jeweled lamps, its murals, copies of old paintings from the Tombs of the Kings, its rich hangings of amethyst and blue, of crimson and brilliant green, it seemed to belong to the past—so might a nobleman of the time of the Ptolemies have journeyed home to his estates from the gaieties of Alexandria.

The trips ashore, too, to visit ruined temples and tombs, were so much more comfortable and pleasant under the efficient organization of the Emir's steward, Yussuf Ali, than it would have been from a steamer. Dragomen, venders of souvenirs, who together with flies are the initial pests of Egypt, seemed to vanish at his approach. Everything they wished to see was seen with the maximum of comfort and luxury. In the evening they dined in the luxurious dining saloon (Yussuf Ali always brought the menu to Veronica during the day for her approval) and afterward danced to the music from the radio or played cards. It made Michael and Veronica laugh a little, the anxious way in which Yussuf would hand Veronica a menu that would have done credit to the Ritz, with the air that the whole kitchen staff was breathless until they had her approval. Veronica wondered what he would have said to her mother's cold-meat suppers at home in Seadon.

The Emir had certainly made Michael a royal gesture in lending them the Nefertari, and Veronica felt they should have been flawlessly happy. If they had only been alone it would have been so different. They were seeing the Nile splendidly, as it should be seen, and yet she felt

somehow they would have been far happier as ordinary tourists on a river steamer, alone among a crowd of strangers. Even the shore trips would have been fun, even though they would be pestered by beggars, venders, dragomen and flies.

Of the whole party only Michael and Veronica were passionately interested in the things they saw. They both had the imaginative faculty to create and see again the past in all its splendor and color; a temple standing with its great broken pillars on the river's edge, its colossal statues fallen, half-buried in the sand, and they could see the priests of years ago with their chanting and robes, the great edifice in its prime, outlining its colors and mass insolently against the sky, but they wanted to be alone together for this. Spoken before others it might sound high-flown or pedantic . . . it was something that could only be spoken of between themselves, and they missed this. They needed it. The presence of their friends robbed them of the very meaning of this holiday. The rest of the party reacted in various ways. The Williamses were frankly bored by sight-seeing. They went round the ancient ruins merely because they felt it was the thing to do, but they cried off if they could and spent the day playing deck tennis and sun bathing. Although they appreciated Yussuf Ali's flawless service, the amazing dinners served every evening and the long evenings playing bridge under the awning or dancing on deck in the moonlight. Alise was the same. She flirted with young Martin and Billy, tried to interest Williams and Michael, lounged in the long cane chairs on the deck, smoked innumerable cigarettes and read innumerable French novels and wished there were more men to appreciate her large and very expensive wardrobe.

Marta went dutifully everywhere Billy went . . . she seemed to hate him to be out of her sight. She had, Veronica was thankful to notice, discarded her black clothes and begun to wear white and violet. Veronica had hoped she would get away from her absorption in grief and come out of herself on this trip. But although she entered into everything gracefully enough she was rather silent and her light blue eyes followed Billy, who was quiet and unlike himself and, when chaffed about it, developed spurts of artificial gaiety which swiftly faded, leaving him staring across the pale, lovely landscape with moody eyes. He was very handsome; the heat had taken a little weight off him, and the sun tanned him a mahogany brown. He looked, Veronica had said laughingly, like one of the bronze statues of the Pharaohs in the museum at Cairo. "Very youthful and ruthless and always a little sulky . . ." but something in his eyes, when he had turned at her words, made her wish she hadn't spoken so. Billy took everything much too seriously these days.

They had left Beni-Hassan with its rock tombs and Assiut with its famous bazaar and were steaming slowly up to Luxor which they would reach at sunset. They had dined but not changed, for the moon was full tonight, and Yussuf was taking them to see the ruins of Karnak by moonlight. Even Alise had been persuaded that the sight would be worth the sacrifice of an evening spent dancing in one of her frothy model gowns.

Everyone but herself and Billy were on the forward deck, watching for the promised sight of the great black columns of Karnak rising against the painted sunset sky. Alise lay back among her cushions, slender and pretty in her blue linen suit and lacy blouse, watching Billy

with her shrewd eyes. She knew she made a pretty picture; she was young, younger than Veronica; from her perfectly shod feet to her perfectly curled golden head she was exquisite; and yet this very good-looking young man leaned moodily against the rail, gazing blackly at the peaceful scene, the pale green and fawn beneath the lemon-colored sunset sky, and was entirely unaware of her. She said crisply, "Why the picture of gloom, Billy?"

He roused himself sharply. "I wasn't aware I was so very gloomy. Hadn't we better go forward and take an eyeful of these famous ruins?"

He offered her a cigarette, which she accepted, and lit it for her, took one himself and stood waiting for her to rise and go forward with him. But she lay there, her fair head against a bright cushion, looking up at him through the cigarette smoke with curious eyes.

"You don't deceive me a little bit, Billy Lennard."

"What do you mean?" he said irritably.

"You're crazy over Veronica," she said calmly.

"Well?" he said defiantly.

"Not at all well," she said provocatively. "Why stand about sulking? Why not do something about it?"

He began to speak, as though he would dismiss her suggestion as nonsense, and then suddenly, as though it was a relief to speak about it, he tossed his unlit cigarette away and dropped down on the footrest of her long chair.

"It's too late to do anything now," he said morosely. His hands twisted together, thinking of Veronica . . . that clear memory of her, radiant in the silver and white of her wedding gown. "I should have done what Michael did and snapped her up . . . only I didn't think then . . . didn't understand."

"How could you?" she said sympathetically. "She's changed beyond all knowing."

"Hasn't she?" he agreed eagerly. "She was just a shy, nervous girl. The only time she ever seemed to shine or have confidence was when she was riding. But now she's lovely——" He stopped and said reluctantly, "She seems happy enough. If I only knew if she really is. Yet why shouldn't she be happy? Michael gives her everything she wants, and he's certainly a looker."

"If you care for that grim, masterful type," said Alise lightly. She had fully appreciated Michael's taut, male handsomeness herself, but this, she thought, was scarcely the time to mention it.

"She doesn't seem interested in anyone but him," said Billy unhappily.

"How do you know? Perhaps she is afraid."

"Of Michael?" he said incredulously.

Alise shrugged. "Who knows? More probably of herself. After all, you are of Veronica's own world, Billy; you belong to her kind; you're just about her age. Why *should* she make such a point of avoiding you; certainly not because she dislikes you?"

"Yes," he said, his face clearing boyishly. "Yes, she *has* avoided me. I thought perhaps it was because I . . . oh, because she found me young and stupid and because I made a fool of myself the other day. But she has always *liked* me. Why should she suddenly change?"

"Why not find out?" said Alise softly.

He looked at her eagerly; he wished suddenly that he *had* spoken to her before. Women had such understanding in these things. It would never have occurred to him that Veronica might be avoiding him, not because she disliked him, but because she liked him too much.

"How can I?" he said sullenly. "She's always with Michael——" He paused, and suddenly his innate honesty and decency came through to the surface of his infatuation. "Besides, Michael's my friend. It wouldn't be playing the game."

Alise looked at him a trifle impatiently. She rather despised this very English type of young man, who tried so hard to live up to impossible standards, to play the game. Alise thanked heaven she had not come from such stock. She came from people who had known worse than hardship, less than poverty, and risen from it with their own ruthless determination. People who knew what they wanted and went after it, were it money or happiness. A little vagrant memory of Alan rose and teased her, even the things you most passionately coveted evaded you sometimes or turned to ashes even as you grasped them in your hands. A little hard, hot feeling of hate rose within her against Veronica. *Veronica*. She said quickly, almost angrily, "It's not breaking any rules of any game to know where you stand."

"No, I suppose not," he said doubtfully.

"Tonight," she said swiftly, "when we go to Karnak I'll try and get the others away if you like, so that you could talk to her alone."

He did not answer; his good-looking eyes were a little bewildered; he was filled half with longing, half with distaste. He had been working up one of those crazy infatuations that the Eastern moon and rare Egyptian air breed. He had been set fair toward settling into the kind of despair that finishes in a big game-hunting expedition or a record flight but much more usually in going back to England and marrying the girl next door who was at kindergarten with you. He hadn't really

thought of *doing* anything about it; Veronica was Michael's wife. There was nothing to do if she gave one absolutely no encouragement. But this suggestion of Alise's that her avoidance of him was deliberate, this foreign creed of taking fate into one's own hands and forcing one's desires from it; it was both tempting and revolting.

Alise's voice said clearly, "Of course I know the service frowns on such things, making love to a fellow officer's wife behind his back, although it's done every day. It's mere hypocrisy to pretend otherwise. It takes quite a lot of courage to face realities, you know."

Her voice mocked at the service, at its rigid rule of at least surface morality, at its insistence on conventions; it mocked at him, stung him scornfully. He broke out passionately, "You don't suppose I want any hole-in-the-corner romance with Verry; she's not that sort. I'd face everything for her, a divorce case, even if it meant giving up the service, but it's playing with fire."

"Most of the interesting and worth-while things are worth burning your fingers for," she said airily. She rose to her feet and went off jauntily along the deck, leaving him a prey to sudden doubts. He did not know what to do. He had been completely thrown off his balance at first sight of Veronica's beauty. He had let himself fall in love without thinking of any consequences, and during this trip, seeing her with Michael, so apparently happy with Michael, he had almost resigned himself to forgetting all about it. But now he felt in a turmoil again. His brain was seething with a thousand formless doubts and fears; his torturing hopes and desires were roused again. He sat for a moment, his boyish brown face tense and sullen, watching Alise's jaunty, slender figure walking along the

deck toward the rest of the party, and suddenly on an impulse he sprang to his feet and caught her up.

"All right," he said, "get me the chance of speaking to her alone. There can be no harm in that."

Alise's eyes narrowed to glinting slits of light as she smiled up at him. About her was the pretty menace of a tiger cub at play. She said quietly, "No harm at all." It was on the tip of her tongue to add, "Unless you lose your head, my young friend."

She looked at him curiously, at the sudden eagerness of him; she noticed his hands were trembling. What was it, she thought, that Veronica had that made men such fools about her? She seemed to get into their blood. Alan, Michael and now this boy. *Alan*. A cold little shudder ran through her, his eyes that night, when she had realized it was not her he saw. "Then comes thy shadow . . ."

She said indifferently, as though the whole matter rather bored her, "I can't work miracles; if I make the opportunity it is up to you to take it."

She went forward to the bows. Slowly, with an intensity of splendor that surpassed anything they had yet seen, the great pylons of Karnak reared up against the flaming sky. Veronica's hand reached out and found Michael's, unseen to everyone save Alise, who suddenly, with a vicious little twist of her lips, turned away.

Yussuf had hired an open carriage to take them through Luxor with its native houses and luxurious modern hotels springing up like growths of modern fungus about its magnificent ruins. In past ages there had been a great town here, a coming and going of boats and people to this mighty temple . . . then civilization had moved, and all

had been quiet here; a few fellahin moving about their endless toil, the beat of bat wings beneath the ancient stones of the roof, once in an age a great noise as some huge monolith or statue came crashing to earth; and then the nineteenth century and the tourist, and once again civilization had swept back, the sort that bows and smiles and rubs its hands and dusts chairs and presents menus; it seemed quite foreign to the great ancient buildings which time, even in the dry soft Egyptian air, must slowly crumble away.

Veronica had not been feeling very well all day. She had not told Michael because he would worry; he had lived in the East before and knew how swift and deadly fevers could be. She did not feel very ill, yet she was not really well, and when the carriage stopped and Yussuf sprang down to hand them down where they were to walk across to the temple she felt sorry the drive was over and did not want to go in. She would have preferred to go in during the day when the sun was high; there was something forbidding, silent with a deadly snakelike silence about the great building. She would have been quite content to sit in the carriage and look at the huge columns in the blazing white radiance of the moonlight, at the striped shadows cast by its columns, at the sense of mystery and the past greatness of it.

But it was stupid to make a fuss so she got down. She walked slowly and found Billy by her side, the others going on a little ahead. Veronica found that her head was throbbing with every step she took and felt it furtively. It seemed a little hot. She must remember to take some quinine when she got back. She didn't want to break the party up with a dose of malaria or sand-fly fever. Billy took her arm, and she did not draw away. She had for-

gotten his behavior at the tennis party, putting it down to the sort of infatuation that young officers seemed to get as regularly as mosquito bites and to recover from just as easily. She was indeed grateful for the support of his arm, for as they turned and entered between the great granite columns the whole huge pattern of black-and-white shadow seemed to list a little, sickeningly, in the moonlight.

She wished unhappily that Michael hadn't gone on in front. But he couldn't always be with her; after all, he was the host, and there were other women in the party. Alise seemed to have decided to attach herself to him for the evening. Veronica smiled. In some strange way she was sorry for Alise; her life seemed so empty, so frivolous; she gave nothing and received nothing. She suddenly thought how smug she must be getting about her love, walking there, smiling, thinking about it, hugging its glory to herself, vaguely pitying those who had not known its splendor.

They had come to a corner by a high wall decorated with hieroglyphics and the graven figures of long-dead kings . . . they could hear the others talking but could not see them.

"Where are they?" she said. "Let's call. . . ."

She called, and her voice echoed, bell-like, along the rows of columns; she heard Michael call back. His voice sounded quite near, and yet in the checkered black-and-white moonlight it was difficult to see which way they went to get through to them. Then Alise's voice, very high and clear: "Oh, I've dropped my bag; oh, how stupid . . . no, I wouldn't think of it. You all go ahead, and I'll slip back . . . it can't be far."

There were sounds of protest, and everyone was

obviously making suggestions or offering to go back for it. It was odd, standing there in that eerie place not seeing them, yet hearing them quite plainly. Alise said, "I'll take Efendu (Efendu was the small native waiter on board, a youthful, smiling creature with a strain of Nubian blood in him, from his wide negroid grin and crimped black hair) and go back as far as the carriage; then I can show Veronica and Billy which way to come."

A few minutes later they heard her steps echoing along the floor toward them.

"Oh, there you are; Michael is getting quite worried, Verry. Go straight ahead and turn left. I'm going back as far as the carriage to see if I can find my bag. I put my diamond clip in it, so I don't want to lose it." She pattered off on her high heels, Efendu trotting just behind her. Billy and Veronica moved forward. A queer little excitement stole over him . . . this was his chance. They went on, turned left by a tall column and found themselves in a little pool of moonlight, which slid down through the broken roof high above. They could still hear the others, but much farther away to the right.

Veronica stopped. Her face in the moonlight, hatless, with its dark, cloudy hair, seemed carved in ivory. So might one of the handmaidens of this temple have looked years ago, still, white, with a proud curved red mouth, a lotus flower in her hair.

"Veronica," he said urgently.

"Why, Alise must have made a mistake," said Veronica. "Listen. They seem farther away than ever. Let's call again."

She raised her hands to her lips to call, but he drew them down; feeling the feverish touch of his hands, she looked at him in wonder.

"Verry, forgive me, but I had to see you alone."

"You mean you *arranged* this?" she said in bewilderment.

"Yes, but, Verry, I must speak to you. You're driving me crazy, Verry. I can't think of anything else; I . . ."

It wasn't what he meant to say. He had meant to be quite calm and logical, but it went to his head, her sweet slender presence there in the moonlight. He dragged her hands to his lips and kissed them wildly. Veronica stood without attempting to draw them away. She was feeling a little dizzy again. Everything seemed startlingly unreal, like a hashish smoker's dream. The huge columns shooting up to the brilliant moon, Billy's wild words and lips. Her head felt dreadful; her cheeks felt alternately burning hot or clammily cold. Encouraged by her lack of protest, he tried to take her in his arms, but she said sharply, "No," and then, "Billy, I don't feel well. Let us find the others."

At her plea Michael would have been all tenderness and consideration, but Billy swept her words impetuously aside, set on his own purpose, the intensity of his own emotion.

"You must listen to me, Veronica. . . ."

"Billy, please. . . ." Any other time she would have teased him into normality or known at least how to handle the situation. But she felt too ill and too tired to care much; she wanted Michael, and she wanted to get back to the Nefertari and go to bed.

"You can't let me go on like this. You must tell me where I stand!"

"Oh, Billy"—her voice had the weary impatience of a sick child's—"you've always been our friend. Surely that is enough?"

"No!"

She turned and began to climb a little unsteadily over some blocks of fallen stone to gain the path by which they had come. As she put out her hand to steady herself there was a dry rustle and a hiss, the faint sound that a disturbed snake might make. She snatched back her hand with a sharp exclamation of fear, lost her balance and fell.

As Billy caught her in his arms, there in the full white glare of the moonlight, Yussuf led the whole party back into the wide aisle. Veronica looked up and saw Michael's face, drained, white, dead looking, and Marta Reynolds' jealous, madly possessive eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

BILLY STOOD THERE, frozen, in the brilliant moonlight, quite unable to cope with the situation. His arms fell helplessly to his sides; he stood very red and embarrassed, senselessly furious at this unexpected intrusion into his carefully planned scene with Veronica. He had so passionately wanted to have her to himself for this short while; in this dark, romantic place everything seemed ideal. Now he felt ruffled and a little foolish. No one was more surprised than he when, released from his arms, she swayed and would have fallen if Michael had not come to life from his grim, white-lipped silence and caught her in his arms.

Michael had not been in the least deceived by Alise's clumsy engineering to give Billy his chance to speak to Veronica alone. Billy wasn't the first young officer who had been in love or imagined himself to be in love with her since they had been in the Middle East. He had told himself it was absurd to worry about it. Veronica was

quite capable of handling such a situation. If he interfered or made a scene it would only make everyone awkward and uncomfortable and give Billy something to dramatize about. Presently they would catch up to the rest of the party, and Veronica would come to his side, and Billy would be sulky and moody all evening. He'd better get it out of his system, and the only way he could do that was to learn just how Veronica felt toward him. Just *how . . . Veronica . . . felt?* Michael tried to switch his thoughts away, to take an interest in Yussuf's deep voice as he pointed out hieroglyphics, explaining wall paintings; he looked like some priest of old in his white robes and flowing red striped burnoose. Michael tried to be as he had always been about such occurrences, patient and understanding. But the minutes stretched out, and still they had not returned. A red, raw primitive jealousy filled him. The memory of that little phrase, "Part of my youth," returned to torment him and the memory of that night at Belle-Marie. "*For love of love or from heart's loneliness.*" That was a bitter, terrifying thought. Veronica *had* been so alone then. She was young and warm-blooded; she had turned to him impulsively, generously; if she had waited just a little longer might not she have found someone else? Someone nearer her own age, someone who was part of her youth?

Michael had controlled a little impatient exclamation, an almost irresistible impulse to leave his guests, forget everything, every convention, and go to find Billy and Veronica, discover what they were doing, what they were saying there alone in the dark temple. He felt a pulse beat suddenly in his throat, and his mouth was dry. Jealousy! He had thought he and Veronica had found a love beyond jealousy, beyond this dreadful searing doubt

that possessed him, this terror of losing her, this hopeless, futile fury.

Alise returned; she had found her bag and was chattering like a parrot to young Martin and Flight Lieutenant Williams. Veronica's long absence with Billy became more and more obvious and awkward. Flirtation was considered an amusing pastime out in Egypt, so long as one was discreet about it. And to be missing from a small party like this was certainly not being discreet. It would have been different if it had been another woman—the languorous Mrs Avery, for instance, who rather fancied herself as a *femme fatale*, although she was actually the most virtuous of young matrons—Alise, already a well-known flirt—but one did not associate this sort of recklessness with Veronica.

Everyone, that is everyone but Michael and Marta, was talking at the top of his or her voice, evidently under the impression that if they talked loudly enough Veronica's absence would go unnoticed. Michael had looked at Marta; she was quite unable to control her feelings. She was deadly white, and her hands were twisting together; she seemed racked with anguish. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. Michael was afraid she was going to make a scene.

He jerked up his head suddenly, shaking his great shoulders as though he would free himself of this sudden madness. The air seemed charged and electric in this ancient place, fraught with evil and suspicion, as though unholy rites had once been enacted there and the very moonlight was tainted. He tried to think sanely and sensibly. What actually had happened? Nothing. Veronica had been with Billy for about fifteen minutes, perhaps a little more. She had often been away from his

side with other attractive men for longer periods of time. But they must be within call, his logic argued cruelly; and she had called once, but now her voice was silent. What was the cause of that suddenly silenced voice? He was behaving as badly as this hysterical, white-faced woman wringing her hands by his side. Why should he even think that Marta's agonized voice voiced his thoughts? "What are they doing?" she said suddenly. "Where can they be?"

Alise turned round, cleverly underlining Marta's anxiety, drawing everyone's attention to the scene like a producer rehearsing an important bit in a play. "Good heavens! Haven't those two come back yet? How very *naughty*! And I told them distinctly which way to come." She laughed, her high tinkling, silvery laugh. "But then the moonlight is so romantic, isn't it, Mr Carson?"

Yussuf Ali was still explaining the writing on the walls in his sonorous Arabic to Flying Officer Martin and the two Williamses; all three were displaying a tactful and very unnatural interest in Egyptian antiquities. Michael turned to Yussuf authoritatively:

"I think we'd better turn back, Yussuf, the Sahiba and Sahib Lennard seem to be lost; we had better find them."

Yussuf, with his usual deep salam, turned and lead the party back in the direction they had come, out into the broad aisle between the pillars, and there, etched in the moonlight, conspicuous in her white linen suit, stood Veronica in Billy's arms, his dark head bent ardently above her.

Michael stopped, too stunned, too agonized for a moment even to think. Veronica! It couldn't be possible, not after what they had been to each other. It wasn't

true. It was just some frightful dream. He would awake presently, in their cabin on the *Nefertari*, and feel her perfumed presence, hear her soft breathing in the lower berth.

Alise's laugh, high, silvery, mocking, broke the spell.

Billy looked up; the color ran up youthfully under his skin, and he stepped back, furious and embarrassed, and Veronica put out her hands like a blind woman and swayed like a reed in the wind. Before he realized he had moved Michael was at her side—whatever the circumstances, he sensed her need of him and must be there—she stumbled against him, and as his arms closed round her he saw she was ill, and every other thought went from his head.

She had not fainted. She looked up at him with great, brilliant pleading eyes, her teeth chattering so violently that she could not speak. Her face looked gray and drawn, so small and peaked that her eyes seemed enormous . . . when he touched her forehead and lips they were hot and dry. He met Yussuf's wise brown eyes questioningly.

"The Sahiba has a fever," said Yussuf urgently. "She should go back to the boat at once. Permit me, Sahib. . . ." He swept off his great crimson-striped burnoose and helped Michael to wrap it round Veronica's limp figure tightly, like a baby's shawl, so that only her pale face showed. In its thick warm folds her shivering stopped a little, but her forehead was wet with a sudden cold sweat. The others crowded anxiously about her. Alise with a wry, cynical twist on her pretty, thin-lipped mouth. This fever was an excellent get-out for Veronica. With any other woman she would have doubted its authenticity. But she did not think Veronica would pretend.

Michael swept her up easily in his arms, for a moment anxiety drowning every other thought and feeling, and carried her back through the black-and-white shadows of the temple toward the carriage. Veronica sighed and relaxed. She felt safe with steely, familiar arms about her, her head on his shoulder. She raised her head just a little, expecting his usual caress, his lips just against the place her smooth dark hair met her forehead. But Michael's face was curiously aloof and hard, his lips set in a long, bitter line. Veronica frowned, a puzzled, weary little frown. She felt too ill to bother much. She did not associate his coldness with Billy. There had been a snake, and she had sprung back and lost her balance, and Billy had caught her. Had she been well she would have seen at once how compromising it had looked, but now, alternately raging hot or shiveringly cold, she felt too ill to worry; she was just relieved and grateful that Michael was there to take care of her; she delivered herself into his keeping with the trust of a tired child.

By the time they were back at the Nefertari her fever was raging. With the aid of the chirpy and birdlike little Mrs Williams Michael undressed her, sponged her down and put her to bed. Her eyes were black and brilliant, her cheeks like poppies; she began to talk confusedly, in odd little disconnected snatches. Yussuf was dispatched to the hotel at Luxor to see if he could find a doctor or a nurse or both, and Michael remained with Veronica, while the rest of the party gathered aimlessly on deck, talking in a desultory manner about everything but the occurrences of the evening.

Billy had gone below to his cabin, where Marta had immediately followed him. He was sharing one of the four cabins with Flying Officer Martin, while Alise was

with Marta. Young Martin stretched himself out on his deck chair, twisting his whisky and soda uncomfortably in his hand. From below they could hear the continual murmur of Marta's passionately protesting voice and Billy's occasional abrupt and, from their tone, extremely discouraging replies. Martin yawned uncomfortably. He hoped she wouldn't be long, because he wanted to turn in. By heaven, if he had a sister like that he'd give her something to get het up about; he didn't know how Leonard could stand it.

Alise said smoothly, "Well, an unfortunate end to a most unfortunate evening."

Flight Lieutenant Williams glanced up at her with swiftly concealed dislike. "It is a pity Veronica is ill," he said crisply.

Alise raised her thin penciled brows mockingly. "Yes, of *course*," she said with the faintest touch of sarcasm. She rose, gathered up her books, handbag, hat, yawned elaborately. "Well, I must be turning in; all this excitement is inclined to be wearing. I'm dog-tired." Her eyes, cool, hard, china blue, challenged the defensive glances of the Williamses—she knew perfectly well that they were Michael and Veronica's closest friends in Alexandria and would very much resent her insinuations. She said, deliberately provocative, "I must remember Veronica's tip when I'm caught in a compromising situation—it's quite a new idea—so much more effective than the old-fashioned fainting fit." She smiled blandly into their indignant faces. "Well, good night," and walked calmly away.

Williams met his wife's eyes uncomfortably and then glanced toward Martin, who was gazing somberly into his half-empty glass. They wondered what the boy was

thinking and if he could be entrusted to hold his tongue. He had the feeling of being in at the birth of a scandal. He was sorry. He admired Veronica terrifically, and Carson was a sahib. Pity that fool Lennard had lost his head.

Little Mrs Williams said determinedly, "Veronica has looked pretty bad all day. I expect the cold air of the temple finished her; it does come over you very suddenly, that kind of fever . . . pity poor Billy hadn't the sense to call us at once, although I expect he was at his wits' end and didn't know what to do." Deliberately she ignored the fact that Billy had taken his arms from Veronica like a guilty lover . . . if he had been aware of her illness there would have been no excuse to release her so. Mrs Williams looked challengingly at her large and rather sheepish husband and the uncomfortable young flying officer. "I can't vouch for Lennard," she said quickly, "or for that charming Mrs Grierson, but I think we three can promise each other to forget all this . . . when we get back to El-Hussar."

The men rose. "Rather. . . ."

"Of course, my pet. . . ."

They clapped for a nightcap, and when Efendu brought it they stood and chatted carelessly about trivial things, the chances of the Emir's mare at the next Sporting Club meeting, tennis, polo, the weather, anything but Michael, Billy and Veronica. Presently they no longer heard the muffled murmur of Marta Reynolds' voice, so they said their good nights and went below.

Several of the company aboard the Nefertari did not sleep that night. Marta, thinking of her lost youth, of Veronica's dark beauty, beauty which seemed to her exaggerated imagination to be destroying both Michael and Billy—the man who had once loved her and the young

brother—the only one she had left to love. Alise had talked to her for quite a while before she went to sleep, talked of the happenings of the evening, little things she said she had noticed between Billy and Veronica, told her how Veronica's influence had come between her and Alan. Skillfully she painted a strange and different Veronica for Marta to brood over, and now she was asleep, her fair curls spread on the pillow, her blue eyes closed, looking as innocent as a cherub, while in the berth above Marta lay awake, agonizing over her words.

Billy, too, was awake, lying face downward in his berth, pressing his hot eyes into the pillow. "No retreat." The words came to him. "He must conquer or die who has no retreat." And there seemed to be no retreat for him now. . . . Michael knew now. And he could not give up, could not even begin to forget Veronica.

Michael sitting by Veronica, listening to the beat of the engines, for the doctor told them they must turn and get her into a hospital in Cairo or somewhere where she could have skilled attention, listening to the soft lap of the water as the Nefertari sped homeward, listening to Veronica's little fretful murmurs as she tossed in her berth. She was half asleep, a light feverish sleep, murmuring jumbled words. Once she said very clearly, "Billy . . . d'you remember the day I rode Ladybird, and Alan didn't want to take me to the dance? . . ." She stopped, then went on, "You sent Michael for me . . . why didn't you come? I knew you. . . . I didn't know . . . Michael. . . ." Her voice trailed off, caught as though on a sob, and then she said quickly, "Michael . . ." and her hand came out blindly, seeking something . . . he took it between his own and she was still.

It was burning hot and very dry. He sat all night,

holding it, wondering, worrying, blaming himself always, never Veronica. Blaming himself that he should have been such a criminal fool to respond to her beauty and warm youthful impulse; it had not been fair to either of them to allow her to give him so thoughtlessly the magic gift of herself. He had told her she was free; he had married her to protect her; he had not wanted anything, and yet when she had turned to him he had been helpless to resist. Suppose it was all a mistake and now she wanted that freedom she had given him? He should have waited, waited until that business of her engagement with Grierson was well in the past, until she had been sure of herself, emotionally stable, *really* free again. But he had loved her so much and wanted her so much that, when she had come to him, he had not the strength to remain sane; he had not wanted to; he had allowed them both to be swept away on a sea of passion. He had not had the strength to refuse that beauty he desired so much.

He tried to control his thoughts, to tell himself he was exaggerating, to end the terrible doubt that gnawed at him in a senseless, endless mockery. Was she turning to someone of her own age, of her own kind? In Seadon her set had been young, reckless, romantic and gay, and he, "bruised and bronzed and nearly twice her years," a man scarred by life as his brown face was scarred, battered, morose. What had she seen in him? What had he ever done that he should deserve that she should love him? He sat by her side all through the night while the Nefertari slid swiftly downstream toward Cairo. Up on the deck the native crew were singing, a queer little monotonous sound on a series of descending quavers, curiously hopeless, at-tune somehow with the despair in his heart. He sat by her, tending her with the care and gentleness of a woman, his

whole world twisted and warped by that memory of her in Billy's arms.

Veronica was certainly very ill, though not dangerously so. The sick bay at El-Hussar was small and only equipped for emergency and slight cases and had no accommodation for women. Besides, it was absurd to tire her with the extra journey to the coast, so Michael had her taken to a private ward in a French hospital in Cairo. She lay there nearly a week until the fever subsided and her temperature slowly descended to normal, nursed by the capable, quiet-voiced sisters in their black robes and huge starched white coifs.

People came to see her. Alise bringing expensive flowers and a totally unexpected invitation from Marta to convalesce at her seaside villa. Veronica wondered if this meant Billy's sister had abandoned her suspicions. She hoped so. Little Mrs Williams came with Alise. They came up from Alexandria by train and stopped overnight at Shephard's. Billy had flowers and fruit sent to her every day, all very extravagant and expensive, but no message. Michael came often. The C.O. was consideration itself; any small service that cropped up between El-Hussar and Heliopolis he allowed Michael to take, so that he would have opportunities of going into Cairo to see her. In two weeks' time he would be going away, flying down to Sudan on an inspection of commercial landing grounds. The C.O. had offered to send someone else, but Veronica was mending rapidly now, and Michael seemed bent on going. The C.O. shook his head over this. He hoped there was nothing in this gossip over Lennard and the Carsons. They had seemed such an ideal couple. It seemed to him that, keen pilot though he was, a month ago Carson would have jumped at this chance of being with his wife. Now he

seemed to *want* to get away. Women! However delightful they were they were still a nuisance. If a good officer got into a scrape there was bound to be a woman behind it. He thanked God he was a bachelor!

Veronica came out of her illness into a world without Michael, a world where the central meaning of her life had disappeared. A world in which she was lost, which she could not understand. He came to see her; he was kind, as always faultlessly considerate about her comfort; she had the best possible ward and attention; flowers came every day; books and the English papers and periodicals, any little thing she mentioned or required was sent to her immediately. But something was missing, something she did not understand. It was as though he had hurriedly thrust her outside the barriers that guarded his heart. The man who came to see her, coming straight from the drome where he had landed, tall and soldierly in his dust-stained uniform, very masculine in this conventlike atmosphere of the hospital, the man who sent her books and flowers, for he never brought them personally these days, who sat by her bed and talked, was not the man she loved. He was like a stranger, like the stranger she had met and married at Seadon, older than his years, walled in his isolation of aloof gravity, regarding the world with his impersonal ice-blue eyes as though he had nothing to do with its follies.

Veronica lay there, rather thin and frail after her illness, looking up at him, longing for one touch of his hand, frightened and unsure, hungry for the love light in his eyes. They were so cold and bleak now. The old scar that the Egyptian sun had nearly bronzed out seemed to stand out fiercely again, emphasizing that taut, strained, withdrawn look about him. She tried to tell herself that this

was Michael, Michael whom she loved, who loved her, in whose arms she had learned the tremulous glory of passion. . . . Michael, her husband.

He came to see her a few days before she came home to make all arrangements for the journey. He had hired a special car to bring her back to Alexandria. She was up, wrapped in one of her frothy chiffon-and-satin negligees, her cheeks matching its soft tea-rose texture, her dark hair loose about her shoulders, shining like black silk. Michael's eyes lit at the sight of her, that bright, hungry, adoring flame that she knew so well, and for a moment her pulses raced with hope. She raised her face for his kiss, and it was like a knife in her heart when he just touched her cheek with his lips before taking the chair on the opposite side of the table.

She said sharply, trying to stifle her fright, "Michael, darling, what is it? Is something wrong?"

He shook his head and smiled, but his smile only touched his lips; his eyes stayed that forbidding, glacial blue green.

"Not actually wrong. I'm going away next week, you know. I was wondering what you were going to do?"

"Do, Michael?" she repeated slowly. "Why, I'm coming home, of course."

He said shortly, "The M.O. seems to think the camp a little hot and dusty for you yet, and you ought not to do anything for a while."

She said in a queer, hurt little voice, "What *is* there to do with Mustapha there? He's absolutely trustworthy. Michael, do you *want* me to go away?"

Something in her voice, that note of appeal, stirred him. He rose and went to the window, looking out onto the cool shady quadrangle, where two of the sisters paced,

telling their beads. The palm trees that grew there and an Arab porter in his floppy white clothes were curiously out of place and foreign; it made him think of a market square in a little French town. Belle-Marie. He turned away and said, "Mrs Reynolds would be glad if you'd go and stay at the villa with her. It's pleasant there near the sea. It would do you good."

As he turned he saw the quick flame color up her cheeks at the mention of Marta's name. Veronica stiffened. This was not a quarrel, in no way approaching one, but there was a queer atmosphere of hostility. Her memory went back suddenly to that night when she had been taken ill. All the time she had been ill one of her most tiresome dreams had been of Billy making love to her; endlessly and wearily she had been trying to explain she was ill, but he wouldn't listen, and she was too tired to resist. She had a sudden realization that there had been some truth in this dream, that Michael had seen her in Billy's arms. Michael and Marta. Why should Marta ask her to the bungalow if she hated and mistrusted her? Why should Michael want her to go?

"I'd rather not go to them," she said quickly.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know." She cast about for an adequate excuse. A few weeks ago she would have said to Michael frankly, "Billy's making a fool of himself; he still thinks he's in love with me. It will only make things more awkward if I go there now," and yet somehow she could not say it now. She tried to think, to analyze her reason for not being perfectly frank with Michael, and was startled to find a fear, a fear that he really did think there was something between herself and Billy. And if there *was* a doubt in his mind she would not hurt or insult him

further by allowing there to be even the smallest suspicion of flirtation. She would not give Billy a further excuse to behave foolishly. There had never been a shadow of doubt between herself and Michael; she was not going to let such a thing happen now. Billy had been difficult and compromising, but it had to end. She was not going to be inveigled into his wild schemes; she must make Michael understand there was nothing in it. She wondered if they had been too cocksure about their marriage. They had been so blissfully happy, so sufficient unto each other, they had not dreamed anything could come between them. Perhaps they should have guarded it more carefully. One does not leave treasure about for any envious hand to pick at.

Perhaps if she agreed quite casually to go to Marta's Michael would realize that the visit held no importance to her. But when she spoke, even to herself her voice sounded awkward and embarrassed.

"Marta is rather difficult, although she is quite a lot better now. Perhaps you are right; it would be pleasant. I could spend all my time on the beach, and Billy won't be in much."

"No, I suppose not." Something in his voice made her push away the light rug across her knees, rise and go to him.

"Michael, dearest, what is it? Tell me what is worrying you."

He put his hands over hers, and she felt his fingers tremble; his touch seemed to burn her. She could not know the iron self-control he was imposing on himself, of his longing to take her in his arms, of his stark need for her, to hear from her lips that she belonged to him alone. But he must be fair; he must give her the right to choose. He must let her go freely to this younger man, to be with

him, talk to him, to learn where her heart really lay. He must not think he had any claim to her because he worshiped her, because he had done so much for her, because he was her friend as well as her husband and lover. Between a man and a woman there should be no tie but love. He could only pray that she would find out it was he whom she loved, he to whom she would finally turn. If not? A wry little smile curved his mouth . . . that was Kismet . . . a man could always find a way out. He gave her hands a little friendly squeeze. "I'll tell Marta you'll come then," he said, ignoring her question. "You can take Mustapha with you as your bearer; I shan't need him."

Again she felt that gentle, coldly firm barrier against her.

"How long will you be away?"

"A week at least."

He stayed a little longer and then left her with the same light kiss, left her bewildered and at loss, desperately unhappy.

Chapter Sixteen

VERONICA STAYED at the hospital for a few more days until she was well enough to go out, and then she went straight to Marta's villa in Bulkeley. It was a delightful little place, with marvelous views of the sea, and called, somewhat ironically, she thought, La Repose. The first day she was quite glad she had decided to come.

Alise was no longer there; she had had some tiff with Marta and had made it an excuse to get away. None of the amusing young officers or the interesting civilians called upon Marta, and the company was neither flattering nor entertaining. So she had removed herself and her expensive luggage to one of the palatial hotels along the sea front. Billy was away with a patrol that day, so she and Marta spent a peaceful and happy day on the beach, lazing under a sun umbrella, reading or just idly watching the children at play or the shimmering blue sea, letting the sun and the magic Mediterranean air soak the strength back into her tired limbs again. It was extraordinary how

at ease she felt with Marta when Billy was not present. She had a feeling that if she could be alone with her for quite a while she might, with understanding, lay that unquiet ghost of distrust in the other woman's soul. They found many common interests, much to talk about; they had known many of the same people back in England. Veronica caught glimpses of the unusual and brilliant girl Marta must have been before her husband's dreadful death.

But when they returned in the evening Billy was back for dinner, and though he was very formal and almost amusingly circumspect Veronica sensed the difference at once, the feeling of strain. She had put on a pretty dress of brilliantly flowered chiffon, with a beautiful flaring skirt, partly because she was tired of wearing negligees in the hospital, and it was a relief to get into something smart, more because she had a secret hope that Michael might come over from El-Hussar that night. He was very busy; there was a lot of preparation to be done before their week's flying down to Sudan and back, inspecting all the landing grounds. The weather was uncertain, and there had been some flooding after heavy tropical down-pours. The landing grounds had to be watched in case planes became bogged or, short of fuel, could not land. But knowing he was busy, Veronica still hoped he would come. But Marta glanced at her frock with suspicion, as though it had been put on specially for Billy's benefit. It seemed as though she were trying to persuade herself there was no understanding between them, and yet she could not help watching, waiting for one of them to make a false slip, to come out into the open, to disclose a passionate secret love affair. Veronica's fever had quietened Marta's suspicion over the scene at Karnak . . . quietened it . . .

but seeing her so frail and delicate, so beautiful in her brilliant gown, all Alise's words came back to her, all her fears and suspicions increased a hundredfold.

Veronica kept the conversation impersonal. Michael was coming to see her tomorrow. She wondered if she could not make some excuse to go home or to a hotel. This dreadful watchfulness of Marta's would destroy any good the rest and sea air might achieve. It nagged one's nerves like the grating edge of a knife. She wished Michael would come.

The morning dawned curiously hot and sultry. It was early autumn, and Alexandria had the right to expect clear, brilliant days, hot, but not too hot. But this day was like midsummer. The dust rose in a southerly breeze, as though a gibli, a storm of hot red sand from the desert, was blowing up. On the horizon sultry, brazen clouds lingered, and there was a threat about the burning, copper bowl of the sky.

Veronica felt much stronger. Michael was coming that afternoon before he left the following morning. Yesterday Marta had told her of a tiny shop in one of the native bazaars where really lovely things could be found, not Birmingham-manufactured antiques—really old, lovely things from all parts of the world and much genuine native workmanship. The proprietor was a Jew named Ephraim who had traveled a good deal and specialized in small things of beauty and value for a special clientele, ignoring the catch-penny tourist trade. Veronica wanted something for Michael. It would be his birthday during the week he was away, and she wanted something unusual and attractive to give him, so she decided to take Mustapha and visit Ephraim's shop.

Although she felt so much better she was not really

strong, so she allowed Mustapha to drive the Juggernaut which she had had sent over from El-Hussar, while she sat in the back under a sunshade. She went early, despite the heat, telling Marta she would only be away for an hour at the most and would be back for afternoon tea. Billy was at home, studying or trying to study; his attempts at swotting usually finished up with a detective novel and a pipe. She had not seen him since breakfast.

It was something of a shock, therefore, when she and Mustapha had successfully parked their car in a fairly quiet courtyard, to turn and come face to face with him, obviously waiting for her below a low, overhanging archway in one of the narrow, dark *shawari* of the bazaar.

"Billy!" she exclaimed in sheer annoyance. As Billy came forward Mustapha hung back with the unobtrusive tact of the native servant. If the Sahib Carson's wife chose to meet the young Sahib Lennard in the bazaar it was no business of his. Not a word of it would cross his lips. If it had been his woman he would have taken a knife to both of them, but there was no accounting for the behavior of white women, even one as good as his beloved Sahiba.

"I couldn't let you come down here alone," Billy said, his handsome eyes meeting hers sullenly. The little hot fire which he had controlled these last few days shone in their dark blue depths. "You know it isn't safe."

Veronica replied rather irritably. She had been in Egypt much longer than Billy and knew, or thought she knew, what was safe and what was not. Her irritability was perhaps intensified by the fact that Michael would not let her go into the bazaar without him. The present was to be a surprise; that is why she had come by herself today. "It is perfectly safe," she said then untruthfully; "I've been many a time with Mustapha."

"If Michael doesn't value you enough to take care of you he's a fool. *I'm* not going to let you wander about the bazaar by yourself, exposing yourself to all sorts of dangers. Why, some of these blokes would cut your throat for that ring you're wearing."

She looked down quickly at her ring, her engagement ring. She had a sudden poignant memory of the night Michael had given her that lovely glittering stone and their first kiss. It gave her a sudden patience and tolerance with this sullen, impulsive boy.

"Billy, you're being absurd. And you're making things very difficult. You're upsetting your sister and putting me in a very awkward position. At first I thought you were just pretending like some of the other boys do." She sighed and frowned, then said, "But if you insist on taking yourself seriously I suppose I must take you seriously too."

The color came to Billy's face, and he came eagerly forward and caught her hand. She was wearing the same white linen suit she had worn when she had met him off the steamer. The fever had made her thinner; there was something fine and brittle about her that excited him strangely; she was like some rare jewel or hothouse plant that needed protection and care. He could not bear to see her walking through these seething streets, fly-ridden, boiling cesspools of multicolored humanity, accompanied only by one native bearer. He said eagerly, "If only you would, Veronica. If only you'd let me tell you how much I care."

She disengaged her hand firmly and calmly.

"Well, listen. I'm Michael's wife. He loves me, and I love him, more than I ever dreamed it possible to love anyone. He is the beginning and the end of everything for me. If anything should happen to him I wouldn't want to live either." She smiled, her soft, dark-eyed smile of

extraordinary sweetness and warmth. "Now do you see, Billy? Can't you understand that while I'm very anxious to have you as my friend I'm not in the least interested in you sentimentally."

He said stubbornly, "I don't believe it. He's so much older than you. You were lonely and grateful to him." He paused with the sullen determination of a spoiled child who sees a coveted toy set up high on a shelf out of reach. "I won't give up. I won't believe it. If only I'd seen my chance at Seadon you'd have come to me instead. But you've married him, and you're determined to be conventional; you can't rise above conventions; you cannot understand that, the way I feel for you, things like conventions and appearances don't count for me."

Veronica lost her temper.

"Perhaps you'll allow my bearer and me to pass and get on with our shopping, Mr Lennard," she said coldly. "You're merely being stupid and tiresome."

Billy came off his high horse at once.

"Verry, let me come with you. I swear I won't speak of what I feel. I'll walk behind with Mustapha and carry the parcels if you like. Only let me come."

The picture caught at her sense of humor. Veronica could never be angry for long. Besides, although she was angry with Billy, she could not help being a little relieved at his presence there in the bazaar. She had never been alone and but for the fact that she wanted the present as a surprise for Michael would not have ventured so far. She relented a little.

"All right, you can come along if you won't get romantic. And that goes for the rest of my stay with your sister. I'll pack up and go if the matter is mentioned again. Now we must go. I want to go to Ephraim's to get some-

thing for Michael. I promised Marta I'd be back before four."

Billy made a wry little face at Michael's name, but there was something about Veronica's expression that warned him it would be useless to press her. He walked along beside her through the narrow alleys. Neither of them talked much, and when he did speak Veronica answered in the barest monosyllables. She was regretting her cowardice and weakness in allowing him to accompany her. It was reassuring to have his presence in these crowded streets, but what would Marta say when she heard? Veronica did not believe she would not hear; everyone knew everyone else's movements in Alexandria.

Mustapha kept the crowd of filthy ragged children away from them, with their outstretched clawlike hands, their dark avid little faces often running with sores or hideously pock-marked. Veronica, however often she came, could never get over this tragedy of soiled and wasted childhood. The lowest dockside slums of Europe could not produce children like these. They were like the scavenger dogs that ran wild and hungry in the streets. And yet always there was that hidden hint of youth, of the unspoiled gaiety of childhood, so that their tragedy was worse than if they had been all horror. Mustapha swept them aside as ruthlessly as though they were animals, not hesitating to use his stick. She went as usual, white-faced, behind him, wishing he would be gentle with them but knowing that without him they would never reach the shop, never get past these outstretched hands, these thin shrill voices, crying, "Bukshee! Sahiba, *ana muskeen*. . . . Bukshee!"

At last they reached Ephraim's, and Veronica went in. The children swept off like a swarm of locusts after a

party of tourists, leaving a curious calm in their wake. She went slowly round the shop, examining the curious and lovely things. She didn't know exactly what she wanted, but it must be something out of the ordinary and beautiful, for Michael had a great knowledge of old lovely things. Billy stood near the door, watching her slim white-clad figure, her beautiful, grave face as she handled the objects of bronze and silver, brass and china. She knew Michael wanted a paperweight for his desk, and she wanted to find something that would serve that purpose.

She was hesitating between a little bronze Anubis, the jackal-headed god of the dead, and a cupid in Chelsea china, as out of place in that oriental collection as an English rose would be in the Sahara, when there was a sudden noise outside. She went to the door and stood near Billy and Mustapha. At the stall exactly opposite two great Negroes were having a violent altercation with the Arab proprietor. Veronica's knowledge of Arabic was small, but she gathered they had been cheated or thought they had. As their voices rose heads were thrust out of the screened and latticed windows above. People began to crowd out of the alleys. In a moment the narrow *shari* was packed with a dense, excited, dark-faced throng. Veronica stood back, smiling a little, not taking the scene very seriously. These bazaar quarrels broke out on the slightest provocation and were just as easily forgotten.

Suddenly she heard a sharp scream from one of the women watching from a window above and a long wailing sound. A knife had flashed, and one of the men had fallen. There was a great shout and, as though flame had been applied to a bunch of dry tinder, the whole alley became a mass of screaming, struggling, fighting people. Stalls were upset; black hands began to flash out, grasping fallen

articles and the fruit that rolled to the floor. As always in a riot, the looter was well to the fore.

Billy drew her into the close, musk-scented darkness of the shop, while Mustapha and the proprietor, Ephraim, fought their way out to bring in the goods displayed on the front and put up the shutters. Outside the fighting had settled down into a blood feud.

With the shutters up it was very dark in the shop. Ephraim took them through into a small room behind the shop where he kept his rugs and carpets. It was surprisingly clean, something like a room from the *Arabian Nights*, with its walls hung with garish Indian rugs and soft and exquisite Persian carpets and piles of rugs and *kelims* on the floor.

"Eeef M'sieu and Madame will wait here until the police clear the streets," he suggested.

Veronica ignored Billy's passionate, imploring look. It was maddening, but there was nothing to do but wait. She hoped she would be back before Michael came. She bought the china cupid, with its fair curls and tiny azure wings; it was riding a lambkin, harnessed with ropes of flowers. It seemed less sinister than the stalking jackal-headed Egyptian Anubis, god of the dead. She thought of the Tombs of the Kings and wondered if there was anything in the superstition that they brought ill luck to those who visited them. Her life seemed to have been out of tune since . . . her illness, Billy's foolish infatuation, the shadow between her and Michael. Perhaps the little Chelsea god would bring back peace and happiness again.

The obliging and, for all his exterior dirt, courteous Jewish proprietor brought them some coffee and would have left them tactfully if Veronica had not called him back. She thought amusedly she had never had such an un-

usual chaperon. Still it was better to hear Ephraim tell in his broken English of his travels about the Adriatic and the Levant than to suffer Billy's hotheaded love-making. Outside the battle raged, even after the police whistles began to sound. There was a crack of rifle fire as the military fired over the heads of the mob to frighten them. A strong smell of burning, and the clanging of bells as the fire brigade went by in a distant street. There was nothing to do but wait.

Veronica looked anxiously at her watch. It was after four now. She had been expecting Michael at four. She asked if there was a telephone in the house, but Ephraim shook his head sadly and nearly exploded with apologies. Mustapha offered to try to get through, but she would not let him take the risk. There was nothing to do but wait.

Chapter Seventeen

WHEN MICHAEL ARRIVED at La Repose he found Marta in a turmoil of anxiety and Alise lounging in a chair on the veranda overlooking the sea. She looked as pretty as a magazine cover in an organdy the delicate pink and mauve of sweet-pea petals. Marta told him what had happened.

"Veronica went out early, shortly after lunch, and Billy immediately afterward; neither of them have returned. I believe Veronica was going to the bazaar. Oh, what can have happened?"

Michael felt his throat contract a little.

"She didn't go to the bazaar alone?" he said evenly.

Alise said lightly, glancing at her cigarette smoke, "I expect you'll find our young Lochinvar caught her up, else why should he hurry out so quickly?"

"Did they go together?" he asked Marta.

She flashed him a terrible look. "No."

Alise said lightly, "Of course Billy followed Veronica, Marta; don't be such an idiot."

"Why should he follow her?" demanded Marta.

"Well, Mrs Carson is very popular with all the young men, isn't she, Mr Carson?"

Michael looked down at her, into her cool china-blue eyes. He knew that she was deliberately trying to bait him. For some obscure bitter reason of her own she disliked him, disliked Veronica. She had absolutely no reason, indeed Veronica had reason enough to dislike her. Perhaps it was because Veronica had once risen triumphantly above her cruelty and found happiness that she did harbor this feeling toward them. He would not let himself believe her insinuations.

The houseboy came in, his eyes rolling whitely in his dark face. One of the servants next door had been into town. There was rioting in the bazaar . . . should he go and look for the Sahiba Carson? The color drained out of Michael's face, and he stooped to pick up his sun helmet. The very thought that she might be hurt made him feel sick and empty.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll go myself." He turned to Marta. "Where did you say she had gone?"

"To Ephraim's," she said. "It's right in the middle of the native quarter, at the corner of a little courtyard." She twisted her hands anxiously. "I'd better go with you. I could take you, but I don't know the name of the street. She took Mustapha; he knew where it was."

Michael glanced at the clock. It was five o'clock. Veronica had been gone since just after midday. He said shortly, "I'll go and look for her. I'm supposed to be back by six; there's a mess dinner tonight. If I don't come back perhaps you'll phone through to El-Hussar and——" His words were cut short by the triumphant tooting of the Juggernaut as Billy brought it to a standstill outside the

gate. Through the window they could see Veronica, rather pale and exhausted, sitting next to him, with Mustapha, grinning from ear to ear in relief at their safe return, in the back seat. Alise blew a cloud of cigarette smoke ceilingward.

"So they *did* meet," she said softly. "What a coincidence in a crowded place like the bazaars. Veronica always has such an amusing excuse; first it was fever; this time it will be the riots, I suppose. And I used to think her so young and innocent."

The words were said lightly, without the slightest malice, yet their meaning was there plain enough. Alise was only being amusing, and yet Marta went pale. She made an effort, pulled herself together and went out to meet them. Veronica came straight in to Michael's side, her eyes scanning his face anxiously.

"Darling, were you worried? I'm terribly sorry. We were right in the middle of it; it started right opposite Ephraim's shop. It was terrible. As though the entire population had gone crazy."

Michael said simply, "Thank God you're safe."

For the moment his voice was different, as it had been before they had gone up to Luxor. It touched a swiftly responding chord in her so that she slipped her hand through his arm, her eyes eager, a little misty, sure for the moment that everything was all right again. Alise's voice cut in gently.

"How strange and fortunate that you should run into Billy."

Billy glanced moodily at Veronica and slumped down into a chair. "I followed her," he said aggressively. "Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

Veronica glanced round. The two voices had recharged

the room with distrust and suspicion. She said quickly, "I'm glad you did come now. I'm sorry I went alone, Michael. I thought I'd be safe with Mustapha; it's taught me a lesson."

"It's a good thing someone has the sense to take care of you," said Billy pointedly.

Alise chimed in, "Yes, isn't it? Was she very cross when she found you'd followed her or really thrilled?"

"Mind your own business," said Billy furiously. Suddenly they seemed on the edge of a scene. Billy had come back in a black, sullen, reckless mood. It was as though he were being borne along in a remorseless stream which he could not fight against. During their enforced stay in Ephraim's shop Veronica had kept the old fool there, babbling in broken English about his shady business deals and doubtful adventures. She had even encouraged the silent Mustapha to talk about his youth in Cairo. Anything, it seemed, rather than talk to him or be left alone in his company for a minute. Billy was very good-looking, and he had the naïve and rather charming conceit of his kind. Women had flattered him and had been easy and willing conquests until he met Veronica. He couldn't and wouldn't believe that she was not interested in him, especially since Alise had suggested she was avoiding him for convention's sake. That had seemed a plausible and delightful way of explaining her attitude. His annoyance when she persisted in ignoring him suddenly veered in Alise's direction. If she had left him alone, not whetted his curiosity with her half-veiled suggestions . . . if only . . . and then her light mockery after this hateful afternoon.

"If you can't be polite," said Alise huffily, "I shall go."

Veronica's lips drew into a tight little line. They were

being stupid and petty. She was only worried about Michael . . . what he thought, if he was upset. Billy and Alise grated on her nerves like two buzzing, irritating flies, but they were not important. Still she supposed that for appearance's sake she must strive to keep the peace between them. She turned to Marta and smiled. "Shall we have tea now? I think everyone is very irritable after an anxious afternoon. It will do us all good to sit and cool off a little."

Marta nodded, but Billy said savagely, "Don't be so damned tactful, Verry," and flung out of the room. They heard his footsteps going upstairs and the angry bang of his bedroom door.

Veronica shrugged helplessly and turned to Michael. She wished, as she had wished at the tennis party, that they would all leave, so that he could take her in his arms and they could be alone together. But this was not her home; this time she could not tactfully send them all away. But she must see Michael alone . . . it would be at least six days. She was thankful when he said:

"I can't stay any longer, Mrs Reynolds. I'm awfully sorry. We've got some fellows coming over from one of the destroyers. The fleet's anchored outside the harbor, you know. We're entertaining some of them tonight. I'll be back in a week, and I'll see you then."

Veronica said quickly, "I'll walk down the road with you, Michael, or shall I run you back to camp in the Juggernaut?"

"No, thanks, I'll pick up a taxi."

Out in the bright sunshine they walked slowly toward the sea front where there was more traffic and more chance of finding an empty taxi.

He said irrelevantly, "Did you find anything in the bazaar?"

Veronica opened her handbag and took out the little painted cupid with his lamb and flower wreaths, his blue wings and gaily gilded stand. "I got this for you for a paperweight. It isn't a bit practical, but it looked so lost, somehow, among the Egyptian gods and Chinese idols."

He took it and smiled. It was so naïve, so charming, such a very blond English little god of love.

"I shan't wish you a happy birthday," she said, smiling a little mistily; "not yet. I'm going to be conceited and selfish enough to hope it can't be completely happy without me. I'll be so glad when you're back, Michael."

His eyes searched her face, so young, so clear and lovely. He would not believe that she could deliberately deceive him. If she had found her heart belonged to another she would have come to him frankly and told him the truth, unless perhaps she felt she owed him something, was afraid of hurting him. He knew how she shrank from giving pain. But surely she could see this gnawing doubt was worse than a swift, clean pain.

"I'll be glad, too, Veronica," he said slowly. He lifted the little china cupid. "Thanks for this. I'll take it with me. For luck."

"Guard it carefully," she said; "it's our love."

He smiled, a taut, curious smile. "With my life," he said. He drew her to him and kissed her with the familiar, delirious thrill of desire, the first time he had kissed her so since she had been ill, and yet there was something final about the touch of his lips. A man might kiss like that who went out to an uncertain venture. She waited with him until he found a taxi and stood on the corner watching until it disappeared in the direction of El-Hussar. Then she

turned and went slowly back to the villa. Marta was waiting in the drawing room. Alise had gone. Marta said in a queer, stifled voice, "I want to talk to you, Veronica."

Veronica smiled and sat down on the divan near the tea tray and began to pour herself out a cup of tea. The commonplace little action, done with Veronica's usual deliberate, yet unconscious grace, seemed to snap Marta's self-control.

"Put that down," she said.

Veronica looked up in sheer astonishment. She saw at once that while she had been out Marta had been working herself up into a passion. She was like that with Billy. If he annoyed her or worried her in any way she would keep it to herself, perhaps for days, never mentioning it before others, always keeping her tragic calm, but when they had gone her resentment, fancied or otherwise, would overflow into an almost hysterical frenzy against him. And now, waiting all afternoon for them to come home, not knowing whether or not they were caught, perhaps killed in the riots, sure now in her exaggerated way that they had made a deliberate assignment to meet in the town, she had worked herself up into a state of unbearable tension.

"I didn't speak before your husband," she began in her quick, stifled voice; "I have hurt him too much in the past; I want to save him another such hurt if I can."

Veronica put down her cup and rose. She had only recently recovered from a severe illness, and she herself felt nervous and drawn. But she saw that it would need all her tact, all her gentleness and consideration to calm Marta. And she saw, too, that she should never have come to the villa. There was far more underlying this than she had realized.

"Mrs Reynolds," she said gently, "I'm terribly sorry this should have happened this afternoon. But you mustn't worry about it. It was kind of Billy to be worried about my safety and to follow me, but really that's all it was."

A dull flame of color came into Marta's pale cheeks.

"How dare you?" she said fiercely. "How dare you try to pretend? D'you think I'm blind? D'you think I haven't seen what has been going on all this while? I know all about you. When I saw you there on the dockside, waiting for Billy, I knew what would happen. I know you because I was once like you, selfish, cruel, attractive; because I took pleasure in fascinating men just for the fun, just to watch their antics, like butterflies on a pin, not caring whether they were hurt or not. I implore you to leave Billy alone."

Veronica pushed her hair back from her forehead with a little weary gesture. She was sorry for Marta; perhaps under different circumstances she would have had more patience. But she was not strong, and she was worried about Michael. She simply could not stand any more.

"Billy has been foolish," she said, "but many young officers are. It means nothing. He'll get over it. You'll see. The first pretty unmarried girl who comes out from England will have him at her feet."

"You've got to listen to me," said Marta fiercely. "You can't put me off like that. Don't you see you are ruining two men's lives. You know how they look on this sort of thing in the service. If it becomes an open scandal you'll ruin Billy's career and Michael's. Can't you see you're breaking Michael's heart?"

"Michael knows Billy too well to take him seriously."

"You are willfully blind," declared Marta passionately. "Can't you see what you're doing to him? Can't you see

you're doing the same thing as I did, driving him toward despair? If you will not think of my brother think of your husband."

Veronica went white. Was there, after all, some truth in the crazy thread of Marta's suspicion? Billy had behaved recklessly. Surely Michael didn't really think . . . ? A vivid memory of that night at Karnak came back to her, when Billy had caught her in his arms, a memory of Michael's face since that night, withdrawn, cold, introspective. For a moment a blaze of sheer anger possessed her, that Billy, with his selfish puppy conceit, should hurt Michael. She hadn't even dreamed that Michael would take it any more seriously than the others who had danced attention on her. But she had known Billy before she had known Michael; that made a difference. She put her hand suddenly across her eyes. "I shouldn't have let him go," she thought, "with this shadow between us. I should have talked to him . . . had it out . . . a week now, a whole week before I can see him again, before I have the chance to put things right." She thought of Michael. She must speak to him tonight over the phone; tomorrow he would be gone. The little ghost of dread that haunts every pilot's wife appeared to mock her . . . supposing . . . ? She would not let herself think of that. Of course he would come back to her.

Marta was speaking again. "I wanted to be sure; that's why I asked you here. I had to know if you were arranging to meet Billy. He's mad about you, you know. He'd risk anything for you. Leave him alone, Veronica; he's all I have. All that's left to me. Soon enough he'll marry and go away from me. Don't ruin him before that happens. Don't spoil his youth."

Veronica's hand dropped to her side. Her eyes were grave, although she was smiling, a strange, sad smile.

"I understand, Mrs Reynolds. You're quite mistaken. I've done nothing to encourage Billy and nothing to hurt Michael, but since you feel certain I have done so surely it would be better if I stayed at a hotel or went to the bungalow. I was afraid that there had been gossip, that Michael might have heard it. That is why I came. If I stayed here I thought people would see it was all nonsense. But I have no wish to upset you by staying here any longer. I came as well because I thought you liked me and wanted me here. I didn't understand you wanted to spy on me."

Marta's face did not soften.

"I would rather you remained; it will not make things any better. People will only talk if you go to a hotel."

Veronica shrugged. "I'm afraid we can't have it both ways."

"Billy will think I've sent you away," said Marta desperately. "It will turn him against me."

Veronica put her hand gently on the older woman's shoulder, but Marta flinched away as though her hand burned. "I'm sorry, Mrs Reynolds; I'd rather go. I'm not thinking of Billy; I'm thinking of you. However Billy takes it, you will not rest so long as I am here. If you'll excuse me I'll pack my things and get Mustapha to put them in the car."

She went to the door and paused, trying to find something to say to Marta to comfort her, to allay her tragically absurd suspicions, but there was nothing she could say except "Good-by."

She telephoned to a hotel and went upstairs to pack. It would be foolish to try to get hold of Michael yet. It was past the time when they should have dined, and he would

probably already be over at the mess. She must try to get him later.

Mustapha loaded her trunks onto the Juggernaut, and as she went down the stairs Billy was waiting for her in the hall. He had just finished dressing and looked very handsome in the black and white of his dinner suit.

"What has she been saying to you?" he demanded. "Where are you going?"

Veronica released her hand firmly. Her eyes met his, coldly accusing.

"Billy, will you kindly let me pass? You've done enough harm. You've behaved badly in any case but, knowing your sister's state of mind, you've been most unkind."

"Tell me where you're going," he implored. "Let me come and see you."

"I would rather not see you at all. And now will you stand out of my way?" He had caught her arm again, but he let his hand drop, a little abashed by the scorn in her eyes. She went to the car, and Mustapha sprang in behind. She drove away without glancing round at him.

Veronica felt bitterly angry with Billy. He had sacrificed Marta deliberately and perhaps she and Michael as well to his selfish egotism. She never wanted to see him again.

She found a room at the Magnifique, a palatial hotel overlooking the sea. Not because she admired its magnificence, but it was the one hotel she knew well. She changed and went down late to dinner. Sitting over her coffee in the lounge, she saw a group of well-dressed young men clustering about a curly blonde head and a shimmering silver dress that brought back poignant memories . . . a strange night that . . . all her happiness had begun with it, all her troubles. The memory had more than a touch of

truth for it was Alise, and when she saw Veronica she dismissed her group of admiring young men and came over to her table.

"My dear," she said, raising her eyebrows amusedly, "why is this? Did Marta turn you out?"

Her tone was very friendly and tolerantly amused, as though she understood exactly what Veronica had had to put up with.

"I thought it better to leave," said Veronica.

"Of course, I understand. And that child Billy behaving like a lovelorn tiger cub. By the way"—she dropped down into a chair by Veronica's side and smiled with engaging frankness—"I have an apology to make. You know, I fixed that business at Karnak."

"Yes," said Veronica coolly, "I knew."

"You must forgive me. I thought it was so much fun. I had no idea the boy was a case about you. You will forgive me, won't you?"

Veronica said indifferently, "There is nothing to forgive."

Alise lit a cigarette, crossed slim silken legs and intently examined her stilt-heeled silver shoe. "How long are you staying?" she asked casually.

"Until Michael returns."

"Oh." She paused, then said lightly, "I hope you didn't tell young Lennard where you were staying; we'll have him haunting the place."

Veronica shook her head, finished her coffee and rose, gathering her fur coat about her, for although the days were hot it fell sharply cold after sunset.

"I'm going for a stroll on the terrace," she said. "I may see you tomorrow."

"Of course you must," said Alise with apparent delight.

"Let's spend the day together on the beach. You mustn't do anything too strenuous yet, you know."

Veronica went into one of the telephone booths and called up the camp. After some delay she was told the flight had left already. Michael had been called away from the mess dinner when reports of flooded landing grounds had come in and a civilian plane bogged in the thick desert mud down south. Veronica knew in such a case the R.A.F. planes would leave immediately to "stand by" until the civil machine was out of trouble. She asked the operator to telephone her at the Magnifique immediately the flight was wired in on their return. It was all she could do. Michael would not be back for at least five days.

On the other side of the great ornate lounge Alise was also telephoning—to La Repose. She was saying, "I thought you might like to know she's here, Billy. No, you silly boy, of course she's not really cross with you. Surely you know more about women than that." Her light laughter tinkled over the wire. "We're spending the day together tomorrow. . . . Yes . . . yes . . . on the beach, I think. . . . Oh, I don't think we'll be far from the hotel."

Veronica left the hotel and walked sharply along the sea front in the direction of the town. The sky was like black velvet, the stars near and huge, like diamonds on display on its soft, somber depth. Out over the dark mystery of the sea the Quaitbey light sent its brilliant beam. She wondered where Michael was. It was curious to think of him up there in the velvety darkness. It seemed to put him very far away from her, as though he were in another world, out of reach. A little dry sob caught in her throat. If only she could be with him, tell him all about this absurd and dreadful business. Surely he would understand;

he had always understood. Presently she would be in his arms, and they would be laughing about it together. But he was far away, terribly far away, out where no message could reach him.

She walked for about an hour, only turning back when she came to where the cabarets twinkled brightly, where the cafés spread their awnings and crops of little chairs and tables and the sea front began to take on the appearance of a small Paris, rather surprised to find itself by the sea. A swarthy and rather fat Egyptian gentleman in a fez began to take more than a fatherly interest in her, perhaps justifiable, for it was close on midnight, and an Englishwoman walking alone, well dressed, hatless, was not by any means a usual sight. So she called a taxi and drove back to her hotel.

The clerk at the desk, when she asked for her keys, handed her some flowers which he said had been sent and a note. Carnations, flown from France, terribly expensive. She had noticed them in the exotic flower stand in the hotel entrance when she went out. The blood rushed to her cheeks. She could hardly wait to get up to her room to tear open the note with trembling, eager fingers. It was from Billy.

Forgive me, Verry, darling, just let me see you; that's all I ask. I promise to be good. Yours,

BILLY.

Veronica tore the note across and tossed it into the wastepaper basket, sending the carnations whirling after it. They lay there, exquisite, red as blood, their clovelike fragrance filling the air.

She did not glance at them, throwing herself down on the bed, her whole being numb with disappointment. She

had been so sure they were from Michael. A little broken, anxious murmur came to her lips, "Michael. . . . Michael. . . ."

She felt tired and beaten. It was late before she awoke next morning. Alise, smartly attired for the beach, came to fetch her. She strolled about the room while Veronica splashed in her bath, and her glance fell on the carnations, drooping but still exquisite in the wastepaper basket.

"My dear," she called through the door above the hissing of the shower, "what extravagance, throwing away such beautiful flowers."

"You can have them; I don't want them!" shouted Veronica.

"Well, at least let's put the poor darlings in water," said Alise.

She stood and lifted them out of the basket, her quick fingers searching for a card; finding none a swift flicker of disappointment crossed her face. Then, at the bottom of the basket, she saw Billy's note, torn neatly in two.

She picked it up, pieced the two halves together, read it. Then thoughtfully and deliberately she put it in her handbag.

Chapter Eighteen

*A*LISE, looking incredibly blonde and young in her abbreviated printed silk play suit, lounged with careful carelessness beneath a large striped sunshade stuck into the sand. She did not swim or indulge in any of the usual beach sports, for her skin was of that fine babyish texture that turned to a lobsterlike and painful crimson if exposed to the sun for any length of time.

So she stayed in the shade, lounging on cushions and rugs, surrounded by sweetmeats and highly colored magazines, every blonde curl in place, pearly complexion perfect, exquisite in detail down to the tips of her lacquered toenails, and held a sort of court with the young men who dropped down beside her to flirt and laugh and idle the sun-filled hours away. It was distinctly annoying for her, therefore, to find that during the week that Veronica had been at the Magnifique her court of sun-bronzed young men was by no means so faithful and exhibited a most ungallant preference for Veronica's com-

pany in the surf or in pursuit of an enormous colored ball or childishly exciting games of cricket or tennis on the beach.

Veronica was really better. Away from the harrowing atmosphere of La Repose she felt altogether different. She was young enough to be able to shelve her private troubles and to respond to the tingling exhilaration of sea and sun, and the sea and sun of Alexandria had a particular winy, heady quality, like champagne foaming into a crystal glass. She was popular among the English civilian residents and among the service people, and they were one and all delighted to see her about again. Talking and laughing with her, seeing her so apparently unconcerned and happy, with no obvious preference for any of the young men who danced attention on her, the first ugly murmurs of scandal were quieted again, and the hints and insinuations that Alise had carefully spread about the trip up the Nile and the riot in the bazaar were dismissed as spiteful half-truths and exaggerations. With Veronica in Cairo, ill and unable to defend herself, these rumors had grown with sinister rapidity, but with Veronica back again, clear-eyed, frank, so much the charming English girl, so little the *femme fatale* that Alise had created, they faded to insignificance.

In her plain, tailored, workmanlike beach clothes, slim and bronzed, infinitely vital, she was both a shock and a revelation to Alise. It was maddeningly irritating for one of Alise's temperament to be so completely outshone by one who so obviously had not the slightest desire to compete with her. If one had a dear enemy who deliberately competed for the best hairdresser, the made exclusive gowns and bewildering feminine effects, the company of the wealthiest or most charming men, she

could understand and appreciate that. It was a case of ironically saluting an enemy. But Veronica so obviously did not care. She was just beautiful. She loved life with the passion of one whose inner, intimate life was flawlessly happy. It was a sort of radiation about her. Because she had known the heights and rapture of passion, the great understanding breadth of love, spite and bitterness were unknown to her. People were drawn to her happily and willingly, because she unconsciously gave them a newer, more vivid appreciation of life.

She had smothered and beaten down her doubts these last few days while Michael had been away. Nothing had come between her and Michael, she told herself determinedly; nothing could. But in any case the moment they telephoned through from the camp to say he was wired in she would take the car and go to meet him. They would go back home, back to the bungalow, where they could be alone, and they would talk this foolish unhappiness out and be absolutely frank as they had always been before and clear this stupid, rather frightening shadow right away. She blamed herself quite a little for being so tolerant with Billy, although it was not in her to be intolerant with anyone. But she should have seen earlier the way things were going with him. But after that first night of unhappiness when Michael had left for the Sudan, with the shadow still between them and nothing explained, she had thought things out, trying not to shirk or be afraid of anything. She had had an emotional and mental spring cleaning. Nothing would come between her and Michael; nothing was going to come between them. If there was one thing worth fighting for it was love. Sometimes one was forced to be selfish about happiness; sometimes one had to apply an ax, even

if it was a very gentle and tolerant one, if people persistently threatened one's happiness. And with Billy there was always the consciousness of the great debt she owed him . . . Michael's life. Once he had saved Michael's life; by one act of careless bravery he had saved her love for her. But now he was threatening her happiness, and regretfully, for Veronica hated parting with a friend, he had to be shut out of her life.

He had arrived on the afternoon after Michael's departure, when she had been on the beach with Alise, full of apologies and pleas, his gay, good-looking face subdued with remorse, for Billy had plenty of skill in coaxing the opposite sex round to forgiveness. It had succeeded with most women since he had been a tiny boy, and he could not, in his arrogant young heart, believe that it would not eventually succeed with Veronica. But she had risen after his first greeting with a light word of apology. The two small Avery children had been playing near, with their Nanny keeping a watchful eye, and she had spent the whole afternoon in their company, in an absorbing game of sand castle and harbors and little boats that wouldn't float right way up, leaving Billy to talk to Alise. Since then she had seen him every day, sitting dourly by himself, watching her . . . as she played or swam or sunbathed. She would not give onlookers an opportunity for scandal or Billy a chance for dramatics by ignoring him completely. Living in the East had taught her diplomacy. She always greeted him with a cool and charming friendliness, often stopped for a light, impersonal word or two, ignoring his smoldering eyes, his attempts to draw her into a more personal conversation, the passionate pleas that trembled on his lips. It was trying and very difficult to keep up, but it seemed the only way. Marta did not

come to the beach often; she had shut herself away behind a cold barrier of hatred that it was futile to endeavor to destroy.

It was now five days since Michael had gone. Five days; it seemed a small eternity. He was due back any time after tomorrow. And as the time drew near the sunny hours seemed to creep interminably. Funny to be playing so unconcernedly in the brilliant sun with these tanned good-looking young men or building a castle for the Avery children, while all the time her mind was away across the desert, thinking with a little thrill of sheer ecstasy that soon she would see Michael again. Perhaps it would be seven or eight days—that was a long while. They had never been apart for so long before, except when she was ill. Under cover of her gaiety there was always a prayer in her heart . . . that the engines would run smoothly, that the weather would be good, that the work he had to do would be easy and swiftly accomplished, a prayer that he would come back to her safely and soon.

The big multicolored rubber ball shot past her into the "goal" built up of one walking stick and a pile of beach wraps. She started back to reality and the sun-filled Alexandria afternoon.

"Dreaming, Mrs Carson?" laughed one of the young men.

"I hope you're dreaming of me," said young Martin. Veronica smiled. She made an attractive figure against the blue-and-gold background of sands and sea and flawless Mediterranean sky. She wore white linen slacks over her swim suit and a brilliant handkerchief, tied peasant fashion, over her dark hair. Her face and bare arms and shoulders and small slender feet were very brown.

"I'm a little tired," she said. "I think I'll have a rest and then go in, if you don't mind."

"Rather not." There were five of them playing, Flight Lieutenant Martin and two more young officers and a charming blonde Swedish girl who was staying at the hotel. They stopped and gathered about her. Young Martin said concernedly, "It's not long since you were laid up, you know; you mustn't overdo it."

"No, I think I'll rest. You carry on."

"Shall we see you this evening?" asked the lovely young Swede. She was just nineteen, like a slim golden statue with eyes like forget-me-nots and natural wheat blonde hair. She was another whose presence Alise found extremely annoying.

"It's gala night at the Magnifique," said young Martin eagerly. "We thought of popping over for the dance; that's if"—he blushed suddenly, for he was very young and his veneer of hard-boiled sophistication was apt to desert him at times—"if you're going to be there——"

"I can't say." Veronica smiled. They were charming boys. Funny how she always thought of them as boys, although most of them were her own age. It was a pity Billy couldn't be like them. "I'm praying with crossed fingers that Michael will be back at any time, but if he isn't I may go in for an hour." Her dark eyes twinkled mischievously, for she knew quite well that Flight Lieutenant Martin's often expressed admiration for her was, technically, a blind. The slim young Scandinavian was absorbing his whole attention, but he was still in the stage of trying to prove to himself he was not in love. "But Sigrid will be there, so why should you worry?"

She laughed at the swift hot color in his face.

She turned and went back to where Alise lounged

gracefully on her cushions, where she had left her beach wrap and sandals and bag, paused suddenly, for Billy was sitting there beside Alise. She rubbed her slim brown foot into the white sand, hesitating impatiently. Why couldn't it be Billy who had fallen for the pretty young Sigrid? It would make things so much more simple. She went slowly toward them, hoping he was not going to be absurd.

Billy wore a rough white toweling wrap over his swimming trunks. He was sitting, flipping over the pages of one of Alise's magazines, but Veronica knew he was watching her covertly through his lashes. Every day on some pretext he came over to them and got into conversation. Veronica was almost sure Alise encouraged him. It did not occur to her that she did so with any malice; she merely thought it amused Alise to intrigue, for surely without some encouragement Billy would have given up his pursuit days ago. Still it was unkind and pointless of Alise to tease him, unless, of course, she was interested in him herself. Veronica halted beside them, and Billy sprang eagerly to his feet.

"Hallo, Billy," she said easily, "I think I'll go in for one more swim and then go back to the hotel."

"May I come too?" he pleaded.

"No, thanks," she said quietly, "I prefer to go by myself."

"So I noticed earlier," he said pointedly, for she had been one of a gay party of young people splashing in the surf an hour before.

She ignored his sarcasm and slipped out of her long linen slacks, standing in her close-fitting white costume, slim and beautiful, her bare brown arms and legs a vivid contrast, all long lines and taut youthful grace. She

pulled off her gypsy kerchief, and for a moment her dark hair streamed in the breeze, before pulling on her tight rubber helmet. She didn't want to go into the water again. She felt tired and would have liked to go back to the hotel to bathe and rest before dinner, lounge on her bed with a cup of tea and a book. Although she felt fit again she still had not quite recovered the old energy she had had before her illness. She could not yet keep up tirelessly through a hectic day.

"Will you wait for me?" she asked Alise.

"I'll go and order tea in my sitting room," said Alise; "perhaps you'll join me later." She began collecting her box of chocolates and numerous magazines, wraps and sun hat, glancing hopefully at Billy who made no attempt to assist her but stood apart, watching Veronica run down to the sea.

"You're a fool to stand it," she said spitefully. "Anyone can see she's only playing with you. If you flirted with someone else or ignored her it would be quite a different matter."

"Quite," he said heavily. "She'd be delighted. But I'm not standing it any longer."

"What do you mean?"

"I've applied for a transfer. The C.O. seems to think it's a good idea. It seems what the Old Man calls my regrettable infatuation has been talked about in our little community. It'll be India, I expect, then perhaps I'll forget her."

Alise rose impatiently. There wasn't going to be a flare-up after all. Billy was going away like a good little boy—Michael would return—Veronica would still wear that maddening look in her eyes, that happiness and fulfillment that drove Alise to desperation, a look that she

would never wear and a feeling she would never know, because, she told herself bitterly, Veronica had stolen it from her. She had stolen Alan from Veronica—was it only a year ago?—but he had had nothing to give her but bitterness, hate and mockery and a reckless humiliating desire. Tenderness, respect, understanding, he would never give her these because of Veronica.

She said angrily, "Oh, you make me sick, all of you. I'm tired of this emotionalizing. Veronica's only a woman, like other women, not Caesar's wife."

She picked up her things and, wrapping herself in her violet cloak, went across the promenade to the hotel. In the entrance hall the reception clerk stopped her.

"Is Mrs Carson on the beach still, madame? There is a message for her."

Alise hesitated.

"No, she's not there; I'll give it to her."

"It is a telephone message; it came some while ago. Flight Lieutenant Carson is wired in at El-Hussar; they asked us to inform Mrs Carson."

"Oh." Alise frowned a little; she smiled with swift graciousness. "Well, she's not on the beach now, so it's no use you sending a page for her. I think she's coming to my sitting room for tea, so I'll tell her then; she'll be delighted, I expect."

"*Oui, M'dame, merci bien.*"

She waited until the man had gone and then went straight up to her room; it would be so much nicer, she thought maliciously, for dear Veronica if Michael's coming were a surprise.

Veronica waded slowly out into the water. It was very blue, blue and clear like aquamarines, the color of Michael's eyes. She could see her feet and legs through

it, very brown against the white rippled sand of the bottom. Tiny shells seemed very large and clear; it was beautifully warm. She would swim for ten minutes, then perhaps Billy would go, and then she would go back to the hotel. The water crept up to her waist, and she plunged forward down into its clear depths and up again, curved like a fish into the air and sunshine, then struck out, with slow leisurely strokes, away from the shore. Presently she ceased swimming and turned over on her back, floating lazily, thinking of Alise with pity in her heart. She had so much, youth, good looks, money—everything, it seemed, except what her heart desired. She had thought she could buy love by bidding for Alan, as though he were an expensive piece of merchandise. Now the bitterness and envy would creep into those pretty baby-blue eyes in unguarded moments; it seemed as though bitterness came oftener now, creeping upon her like some hidden malignant disease, until presently it would entirely absorb her. Until she grew like Marta, embittered and early old, unless a miracle awakened her hard, selfish little heart.

You couldn't talk to Alise about such things. She wouldn't understand, wouldn't let herself understand. She had always been taught to think of herself first; she couldn't understand that to find love and happiness you must indeed "cast your bread upon the waters. . . ." You must give and give and give, heart, body and soul, to the loved one until your two lives were merged into one glorious whole. Poor Alise. Veronica thought of Michael and, remembering him, wondered if even now a message might have come in and be waiting for her. Several times each day this thought came to her, and she would telephone or go back to the hotel just on the

off-chance that there was a message or for some reason the flight might have returned and already be wired in. Whenever she went out she would say, "I mustn't be long or go far away; there might be word from Michael," and it was then she would see the bitterness in Alise's round, tip-tilted girl's face, making it almost ugly and old.

Veronica turned over smoothly, like a brown and white seal and struck out lazily for the shore; it wasn't until she realized that the gay bathing tents and bronzed figures on the white sands were coming no nearer that she felt a faint pang of alarm. She increased her efforts and began to make a little headway. Ordinarily she would not have worried; it wasn't much of a current, just enough to make it hard work for even a strong swimmer to get back to the shore. But she had had a strenuous swim before that afternoon and an exhausting game of ball on the beach—it wasn't so very long since she was convalescent after fever. She felt herself tiring and knew it was going to be difficult. She set her teeth against panic and concentrated on her breathing; strong steady strokes were the only solution. She glanced ahead. It was no use; she was losing ground again, the little current that curled invisibly and insidiously round the bay was pulling her out to sea.

For a split second black fear seized her; she wanted to scream and thresh about in the water, but she knew it would be a waste of breath and strength. The only thing to do was to tread water, get her breath and call to someone on the beach. She thought with a flash of humor, "I do idiotic things without Michael. Going to the bazaar alone the day of the riots, swimming out so far alone.

But he'd be watching me if he was here." She turned on to her back and rested, trying not to be frightened by the irresistible little tug of the water when she did not struggle against it; taking a big breath, she called sharply for help.

She saw Billy look up from his introspective gloom under the scarlet-and-white sun umbrella, spring to his feet, throw off his wrap and tear into the water. In spite of her fear she thought with whimsical exasperation, "*It would be Billy!*" She did not call again, and in a few moments he was by her side.

"What is it, Verry?"

"The current," she gasped; "I can't make any headway; it's taking me out."

"All right, keep still. I'll bring you in; don't get frightened."

She straightened out like a victim in a lifesaving display, and he caught her head and, swimming strongly, soon reached the shore. Veronica waded slowly out and sank down on the sands exhausted, her face white, her heart pumping with the strain. Her friends collected anxiously about her; little Sigrid threw her wrap about her shoulders.

"Are you all right, Mrs Carson?"

She smiled a little wanly. "Yes, now; I'd no idea the current was so strong." She paused for breath, wishing her heart would not pound so. "I've never noticed it before."

"It's when the tide turns," said one of the residents.

"I always thought the Mediterranean was tideless," she said dryly. She accepted Billy's hand as he helped her to her feet; it is difficult to be coldly indifferent to someone who has just saved your life.

"It is, to all intents and purposes, a few yards' pull. Even a park pond has an infinitesimal tide, you know. It's enough to produce that current though."

Her heart was steadying to normal now; her color came back and her breathing was more even. Somebody had collected her things from beneath the umbrella and she took them with a word of thanks.

"I'll change and go back to the hotel," she said. "I'm not so strong as I imagined."

"You'll let me come with you?" Billy insisted.

Her lashes hid her eyes for a moment, then she glanced up again unhappily. They were walking up slowly toward the long row of tents. "It seems ungracious to refuse. Billy—you've just saved my life—but——"

"Nonsense," he said quickly, "you weren't in any serious trouble. Someone would have heard you if I hadn't." His voice altered, and he flushed unhappily; his eyes fell before her clear glance. "In any case, you won't have to put up with me much longer, Verry."

"Why?"

"I'm going away. I've applied for a transfer. The C.O. seems to have got wind of the fact I'm making myself a nuisance to you and Michael and, of course, as Michael is a much more valuable officer he more or less suggested it should be I who should ask to be moved. I'm going to India."

The smile of gratitude she flashed up at him lit his heart while it destroyed his last remnant of hope.

"Thank you, Billy; that was kind of you. As it is, you're only hurting yourself and Marta. . . ."

"And irritating you beyond bearing," he cut in bitterly. "I know, in spite of what Alise said, I've realized that I mean nothing more to you than an annoyance—a

reminder of an unhappy past. I know now that there is no one for you but Michael."

"In spite of what *Alise* said?" she repeated curiously.

"Sorry, Verry," he said uncomfortably. "I shouldn't have said that—it was stupid of me."

"But I insist on knowing. What did she say?"

"She said you avoided me only to—to lead me on," he said, his cheeks burning under her gaze. "That the very fact you did avoid me showed that you could not trust yourself. . . ."

"Oh," said Veronica gravely, "there's not a word of truth in that, Billy. I can't imagine why *Alise* should choose to invent these fabrications against me." She gave a little sigh. "I always thought it was I who should bear her a grudge, but the boot, it seems, is on the other foot. She seems to have put us at cross purposes."

"It doesn't matter now," he said unhappily. "I understand." There was a desperate, hunted look in his handsome eyes. "But it doesn't take the hurt away, Verry—you still fill my landscape. It doesn't stop me loving you, even though I realize you'd sacrifice my whole life to save Michael's little finger. That's why I'm going away."

"In that case wouldn't it be better to say good-by quickly now? Even though it may be some while before you go. Wouldn't it be better just not to see me again?"

He took a long breath, looking down on her as she stood there in the sunshine, a mad desire to try once more, to force her to respond to the passion that consumed him—as though by willing it he could make her care—possessed his senses. As though she read something of his thoughts she shivered a little and drew her wrap more closely around her. The sun was slipping westward now; the sky in the east had faded from its brilliant blue

to the palest lemon; soon would come the swift Eastern dusk, and the stars would begin to glitter with steely brilliance in the evening sky.

"You're cold," he said quickly; "go and change. I'll walk back to the hotel with you. You'll not see me again before I go away; I promise you that, Verry; I promise—I'll keep out of your way."

Veronica went into the bathing tent, feeling cold and wet and despondent. She did not want to part from Billy like this, with this terrible bitterness in his voice and eyes. But it seemed the only way. She had so looked forward to his coming out, to his friendliness and familiar companionship. But it had gone wrong, right from the very beginning. It would have been better had he never come to Egypt.

She changed and came out presently in her white linen slacks and a warm white sweater, her bathing things over her arm, and found Billy waiting for her. He, too, had changed into flannels and a blazer, his dark hair still wet and glistening from the sea. He seemed a little pale and hardly spoke as they crossed the wide promenade and entered the hotel gardens; they turned up a wide palm walk to the side entrance, for Alise's rooms overlooked the spacious gardens and were easier to reach from that door.

It was dark there with the warm green gloom of a sunny day. A narrow avenue of magnificent palms met overhead, with seats at intervals along the sanded paths, and flower borders and decorative little fountains. It was empty now; all the nannies had taken their small charges home to bed; the evening loiterers and lovers had not yet arrived and would not until strains of the orchestra began to creep out of the hotel dining room.

Only an Egyptian gardener, patient, bowed white-clad figure, was silently sweeping the sanded pathways. They walked in silence nearly to the hotel door, then Billy stopped.

"I think I'll say good-by here, Verry," he said in a strained, husky voice.

"Very well—good-by, Billy. I'm sorry," she began, but he cut in bitterly. "Sorry for what? It wasn't your fault. You can't help being the loveliest thing that God ever made."

"Billy," she protested gently.

"Verry . . ." He came close to her; his eyes were eager, and she could hear the swift intake of his breath, "I've promised not to see you again; soon I'll be going away. Won't you kiss me, just once, for good-by?"

She drew back a little and put out her hand. "I'm sorry, I'd rather not."

He took her hand, hesitated, then said with a queer, cold ferocity, "You'll forgive me then if I take what you refuse to give." Before she could move or protest he snatched her into his arms, kissing her fiercely, covering her lips and eyes and throat with kisses—kissing her as no one had ever kissed her except Michael, as no man had the right to except Michael. She fought with a sudden blind, feline fury to get away from him, and in a moment his arms dropped despairingly and he let her go.

She stood white and silent, too angry to speak.

"Well, I'll have that memory to take to hell with me," he said recklessly and strode away.

Veronica did not move; she stood there, furiously rubbing her lips with her hand with a childish gesture, as though she could rub away the touch of those lips. She felt humiliated. Billy had no right to assume such an

attitude; it was insufferable that he should have taken advantage of her gratitude to him. She went very slowly up the marble steps into the lounge of the hotel. At the desk the clerk handed her her keys; he was a Frenchman, voluble and charming, romantically sympathetic with her concern for Michael's absence. Such a young, chic, lovely wife. To be alone, ah, *mon Dieu*, it was to be deplored. "The service, *chère madame*," he would say, "is a cruel master." Therefore he greeted her eagerly today.

"You have seen Madame Grierson, madame? She has given you your message?"

"Message?" repeated Veronica numbly.

"*Oui*, madame. About m'sieur the flight lieutenant? Did not she find you? But he has already returned, madame; he is here; he is with Madame Grierson even now."

For a moment Veronica's heart seemed to stop and then raced furiously with a shining gladness. With a word of thanks she turned to race up to the first floor. She could not wait for the lift. As she reached the door of Alise's sitting room she paused. Alise's windows looked directly over the palm walk—she prayed Michael had not seen Billy's reckless, dramatic farewell.

Chapter Nineteen

FAMILIAR LANDMARKS slid beneath Michael's machine, bringing him nearer home. The flight, three humming silver insects in the vast blue of the sky, hung between day and night; already the east was losing its deep midday azure and paling to lemon, forerunner of night, and the blazing ball of the sun sliding westward, gathering crimson and flame in its spectacular downward plunge.

As usual the frantic reports of flooded landing grounds on the East African route that had sent them speeding into the sweltering region of the Sudan had been wildly exaggerated, with the result that Michael found himself heading for home a full day earlier than he had expected. Below the Nile wound like a silver snake between its two green lines of vegetation, a silver snake basking on the yellow-dun bosom of the desert. The heart's blood of Egypt; a heart so old it resembled the dust that cradled it, life so tired that it scarcely moved, blood that had

dried and been born again, Egypt that was too old to live, too proud to die.

He thought of Veronica with a sudden vivid expectancy—how young she was, compared to this tired old country. How young he was—he thought of their life together, the completeness of it, the breath-taking beauty, the perfect understanding, the perfect sharing, until this shadow that was youth had come across their path.

The scattered black tents of the Bedouin that scarred the dun expanse beneath were a welcome sight after the vast, limitless expanse of the desert. Soon those isolated dark spots would become more and more numerous until they merged into the outskirts of Cairo. Already he could see the Gizeh pyramids, black triangles casting long pointed shadows eastward, pointing to the sprawling mass of Cairo, its flat-topped houses, minarets and citadel quivering and dancing with a dreamlike unreality in the afternoon heat. The country was laid out like a yellow-and-green map beneath them, the Delta Barrage, from which the Nile snake becomes a many-headed monster, came in sight. They swung northeast, skirting Cairo city, and crept along the edge of the desert toward the coast. An hour later they were circling the home airdrome from the approach, and Michael's eyes searched the tarmac for a glimpse of Veronica. He was still searching, but with an odd empty hopelessness, when he touched down and with a fitter on each wing tip taxied up to the hangars.

He climbed out, stamping and stretching, pulling off his goggles to rub his eyes, weary and bloodshot after that exhausting peering in the crystal brilliance of the desert. Williams dismissed the flight and made for the C.O.'s office to tender his report, and the other officers

made for their quarters or toward the mess. Michael turned slowly toward the bungalows. He had hoped all the way home that Veronica would be there to meet him. He had somehow made it a turning point; if she was there everything would be all right; if not—— He shrugged; it was absurd, of course; he knew she was with Marta Reynolds at La Repose, and yet he had hoped she would be there.

The airman of the watch saluted, and he stopped and signed the logbook for the party and inquired if Mrs Carson had been informed that he was due in.

"Yes sir, Mrs Carson particularly asked to be informed. I had them telephone her an hour and a half ago."

"Thanks." Michael raised his hand in salute and moved on, a taut, tall figure in the sunshine. The man stood watching him go, a little startled by the sudden tired whiteness of his face.

So she knew he was back, and yet she had not come to meet him. Perhaps she was not well again. A twinge of anxiety seized him. Then some evil imp whispered from his inner consciousness that perhaps she had not cared to come. He thrust the thought away, and his hand in his flying-coat pocket encountered the tiny porcelain cupid. He had never in all his life had a good-luck emblem. He was not one of those pilots who pin their faith to miniature medals of St Christopher or toy black cats. Michael was inclined to be a fatalist—if it was coming to you, you caught it. Yet he had taken the Chelsea china cupid with him as an emblem, but not to guard his life; it was an emblem of his love, his and Veronica's.

A hundred excuses leaped to his mind. She might not have heard that he was back. She might have been out and not received the message. He would change and get

over to Bulkeley to see her; he could take a bag, too, and stop at a hotel overnight, perhaps carry her off with him. His veins tingled at the thought that soon he might have her in his arms again. The bungalow seemed curiously empty with only Ali padding about. He supposed Mustapha was still with Veronica. He bathed, changed into a dinner suit, packed a bag and telephoned for a taxi to take him into Bulkeley.

When he rang at the door of La Repose and was shown into the long cool lounge overlooking the sea Marta was there alone, looking at him as though he were a ghost. He noticed with grim exasperation that she had returned to her old dramatically gloomy mode of dressing. She wore a long black tea gown, with wide draped sleeves; her faded blonde hair was done loosely and was a little untidy. She looked years older than when he had seen her last. She seemed distraught, and her greeting seemed nervous and a little incoherent. He sensed that something had happened, some crisis or other, and a little misgiving seized him. He had thought of Billy and Veronica, not of Marta.

"Hallo," he said easily; "I'm back earlier than I expected. Where's Veronica? Didn't they telephone her to say I was due in?"

"Veronica is not here," she replied stonily; "she's staying at the Magnifique."

"Oh, was it too much for you? Couldn't you manage?"

"No. She chose to go; she chose to go because she knew I could see what was happening." She turned away, paced down the room and came back again, clutching at his arm, looking imploringly up into his face. "Michael, you must listen to me. Once, years ago, I hurt you terribly—believe me, I know the debt I owe you. I wouldn't tell

you this, but you have a right to know how she is deceiving you—how she is destroying my brother——”

He unloosened her fingers gently, restraining an impulse to tear her away from him. He would not listen to these ravings—her mind was warped—she was crazy with grief, with fancied neglect—with jealousy. If Veronica had moved to a hotel it was because she had adequate reasons for going. Perhaps because the position had become too difficult, and her nerves could not stand Marta's jealousy any longer. Perhaps he had been a fool, perhaps a little cruel to encourage her to accept Marta's invitation. But he had wanted her to be free to see Billy. He had tried to be scrupulously fair, to avoid that pitfall of love, possession. He had not wanted her to avoid this issue, or stifle her heart's impulse from a sense of duty or gratitude toward him. He had thought it the harder and fairer way. A sense of foreboding overtook him. Well, soon he would know, one way or the other, the result of his quixotism. Many men would think him a fool. Possession, they would say, is nine points of the law, but that was not Michael's way.

One thing he knew, win or lose, when it came to the showdown, Veronica would tell him the truth. “Break cleanly off and get away, follow down other, wider skies, new lures—alone.” For Veronica, never for him. There would never be a new lure in his life, except perhaps the lure of danger which helped one to forget.

“I think you're a little overwrought,” he said kindly. “Don't worry, I'll go to the Magnifique and find her. I expect they phoned there from the camp—she wouldn't think or perhaps thought it better not to mention that she had moved.”

“Michael, you've got to listen. You're mad to blind

yourself like this. That day at the bazaar they arranged to meet; you must have known. What were they doing all that while together? It was obvious. He followed her immediately she left the house. After you had gone that day I faced her with it. I implored her to leave my brother alone. That is why she left. She felt I was watching her; I thought that might finish it, if she knew I was aware of what was happening, going on below my own roof. But she is still seeing him. He is never in the house. The moment he is off duty he is off to the beach, to her hotel, anywhere where she is; he sends her flowers and love letters. Alise brought me this the very day after you left."

She gave him the note Billy had sent with his carnations, the note which began so impetuously, "Forgive me, Verry darling . . ." Without even glancing at it Michael tore it across. His face was set in hard lines. He was tired; he had flown a long way across the desert, but he could stand a hundred such flights rather than this. His patience snapped like a taut wire.

"Whether what you say is the truth or sheer craziness, no one, not even I, has the right to spy on her." He picked up his hat and without another word left the long shady room and went out into the sunshine. The sun was nearly on the horizon now—soon night would be on them with dramatic swiftness, as though a diamond-spangled cloak had been tossed across the sky.

He had kept the taxi waiting, thinking that he would take Veronica away with him. He climbed in wearily, telling the driver, "To the Magnifique."

In the hotel he asked for her. The clerk did not think she was in yet; she had been down on the beach all afternoon—a message? Yes, immediately the message had come

in he had given it to Mrs Grierson, Madame Carson's friend. If he would wait—just one moment. He telephoned Alise's drawing room to tell her of Michael's arrival.

"Madame says that Madame Carson has not yet returned, but will you please to go up? This way, m'sieur." Alise had changed into a tea gown of soft pink velvet, lined with chiffon frills and caught with turquoise ribbon. It was really very effective. She came toward Michael, both hands outstretched.

"Michael—how soon! We did not expect you back until tomorrow at the least."

"The clerk said the drome telephoned Veronica when we were wired in." He took one of the outstretched hands, shook it firmly and let it go. He disliked staginess, particularly in women, and at this moment, tired and anxious as he was, it was particularly irritating.

"Oh yes, of course," Alise glanced away with the affected nervousness of one who has something to hide. "But you must be tired. Do sit down. I'll ring for some tea, or would you like a cocktail?"

"A whisky and soda, please."

He lit a cigarette, his eyes with their clear, inscrutable blue watching Alise with a hard coolness which she did not like. On hearing he had arrived she had flown into the rose velvet tea gown. She had no illusions about Michael's attitude toward her, so uncompromisingly polite and indifferent, and the tall, bronzed giant of a man made her a little nervous, but she did think her sleek velvet and chiffon frills would have had a little more effect than this. After all, he had been in the arid, parched and exclusive masculine desert. Surely something soft and silken and feminine would appeal to him. He

said casually, "The clerk said he gave the message to you."

Alise looked suddenly grave; her lips trembled quite convincingly; her blue eyes seemed to beg forgiveness.

"Oh, Michael—I did get the message, but I haven't had a chance to give it to Veronica. I—I don't know where she is. We did go down to the beach together after lunch, but she was off with all the young men as usual. You know how popular she is. She went off—with Billy somewhere."

He said coldly, "Very charmingly done."

"What do you mean?" she said furiously.

"It's quite simple; for some reason you have been trying to make trouble ever since you came out here. You have worked upon that poor creature Marta Reynolds until she believes anything you say."

Alise swished round, her gown with its lining of chiffon frills whisking round behind her like the tail of an angry kitten. Her mask of smooth prettiness seemed suddenly to have slipped awry. She knew Michael did not admire her, but she had never imagined he saw through her tortuous scheming.

"How dare you?" she began angrily. "How dare you speak to me like that?" At the window she stopped, looking down into the garden below; triumph lit her face, an overwhelming, ugly triumph. "Well, if you won't believe me perhaps you'll believe your own eyes—here they come."

Involuntarily, before he realized what he was doing, Michael crossed to the window; he looked out; a little sound was torn from him, the sound an animal makes when it is wounded. He swung away quickly, too quickly to see Veronica tear herself from Billy's arms. Alise turned to him, her face still twisted with anger.

"You have been so clever, you and Veronica, flaunting your love before everyone, smug and content, despising others who hadn't your happiness, and all the time it was just as false as——"

He put up his hand with sharp command. "Be silent; you've had your revenge." He stood looking down on her, and something about him, the tallness of him, the stark misery in his strong face, frightened her. She realized she had roused feelings of which she had no conception in her shallow little heart. If she had never known love at least she would never know despair. "Don't speak of this to Veronica. You've served your own purpose; this evening you will serve mine."

The door swung open and Veronica came in. She stood poised for a moment at the door, a picture of sweet unstudied youth in her white boyish clothes; then arms outstretched, unaware of Alise, she ran to Michael.

"Michael, my darling." Her face was brilliant, her eyes filled with tears, incoherent with relief and happiness. "Michael, darling—so soon! Why didn't you let me know? I told them to phone me from the camp. . . ."

Alise said awkwardly, "The message only just came through—Michael was here before I had time." She glanced at Michael and was silent. He had scarcely moved; he stood like a man bearing some terrible strain, an unbearable strain under which his whole soul groaned in agony. Then suddenly he seemed to relax, as though it were more than he could bear, as though he had bowed his head beneath it. Fate had challenged his fatalism. When it came to you you had to take it; there was nothing to do but accept.

He had forced this choice on her, and she had taken it. She did not belong to him but to this young man who

had claimed her love. The men of old who kept their women behind bars and guarded them with a sword were right, or perhaps he had been right in his self-enforced isolation before he had met Veronica. He had been hurt once; he should have known. Oh, he was raving like a fool, standing there silently with his mind seething like a witch's brew. If only she had come to him and said, "It was a mistake, Michael. The spring night and the scent of the lemon trees and your kindness to me." But to greet him like this, with a pretense of love in her eyes, not ten minutes after the other man had held her in his arms. . . .

Alise said in a sharp, rather hysterical voice, "Where's Billy?"

Veronica's face clouded. She said slowly, "I've just left him. He's gone home. Michael, did you know he'd applied for a transfer? He's going quite soon—I don't suppose we shall see him much before he goes. He's leaving for India within a week or so, I believe."

A queer feeling, half of thankfulness, half of pain swamped Michael. So she was sending him away. She could do this for him. It was not what he wanted. It was not what he would permit, but it was something to know that she could face this sacrifice for him. He must get away by himself and think. Billy was going away—she must have sent him away. Had that passionate embrace he had just seen been their last farewell? Above all things, she must not yet suspect he knew; if she thought that she might fight against her own wishes, her own happiness and freedom, because of what? Friendliness and gratitude. Oh, this gratitude, it chained one; would she not see that her presence without her love would be a living hell for him?

"I've brought some things," he said quickly, "but I haven't fixed up about a room. I'll go down to the desk and see what they have."

"Why, can't we go back home tonight?" said Veronica slowly. She knew then, with a terrible clearness, that whatever lay between her and Michael had deepened into tragedy. She must see him alone; she must, she must get to the bottom of this terrible misunderstanding; they must talk things out. Had Alise been gossiping and intriguing? Michael wouldn't listen to that, she thought, with a warm rush of loyalty. Had he seen that awful, humiliating scene with Billy? Had he perhaps thought?—her mind refused to believe it. She glanced from Michael to Alise. She could not tell what had happened, but she knew that before he had gone to the Sudan there had been a shadow between them, but now there was more; it was as though without moving from her side, without a word, he had gone voluntarily from her life.

Yet when he spoke his voice seemed untroubled, the same kindly, deep voice with its crisp, authoritative ring of command.

"I let Ali go," he lied easily. "It was some kind of festival in his family, a wedding or something; it would be much easier if I stayed here for the week end."

"I've only a single room," said Veronica. "I've been using Alise's sitting room. But if you can get a double room or a suite I'll move in." Her eyes were suddenly moist; she thought of Belle-Marie, the last time they had stayed at a hotel together, the iron bedstead and the violently colored wallpaper; they had been so terribly happy there. "But let's go home tomorrow. I can manage with Mustapha, and I'm tired of hotel life. I'm longing to go

home." She shivered a little, and he said quickly and anxiously:

"You're cold; you're sure you're quite well again?"

"Why, yes, Michael. I am a little cold. I shouldn't have gone in for that last swim." She looked up at him quickly. "Billy really saved my life; I couldn't get out of the current, and he brought me in."

"I must thank him for that," said Michael slowly.

Alise, who had been sitting curled up on the settee, watching them, suddenly rose. "You'd better get dressed, Veronica," she said, "or you'll be late for dinner."

Michael said to her, "We'd be delighted if you'd dine with us, Mrs Grierson." It was more of a command than a request. Meeting his eyes, she did not dare refuse. She understood now how she was to serve his purpose. He was putting her between him and his love; he did not want to be alone with Veronica; he did not want despair and loss to swamp him.

Veronica's hands made a little protesting gesture, a flutter like the wings of a caged bird. She wanted to be alone with Michael; she did not want anyone there, particularly Alise. She and Michael had been like two people with a beloved ailing child over their love. They were afraid to admit its sickness, afraid to go to a doctor and discover the cause and cure, even to admit the existence of a weakness. But it had gone on long enough, this strange, strained coolness. It had to be faced, to be dragged out into the daylight and examined. But it seemed as though Michael were determined not to be alone with her. She wished passionately that he had not asked Alise, that the evening would go quickly, so that she could be alone with him in their room, in his arms, her heart beating against his—surely they would find peace and understanding then.

Michael went downstairs and Veronica hurried to her room. She bathed and dressed, combed up her soft dark hair and piled it into curls on top of her graceful head, put on the brilliant flowered chiffon dress that she'd worn at Marta's, the night she had waited in vain for Michael to come, fastening a single purple orchid among the clustered, shining waves and curls. She telephoned down for a manicurist and had her nails done, touched the tip of her ears with perfume. She wanted to be exquisite for Michael tonight. Every detail perfect. She waited a little while, hoping Michael would come up for her, and then finally went down into the lounge—he was sitting with Alise, waiting for her. Alise had her silver dress on, and to Veronica's strained nerves it seemed an omen. They had already ordered cocktails and appeared to be talking quite gaily. Veronica went toward them, feeling suddenly nervous and shy, as though they were familiar friends and she was an intruding stranger.

Michael rose to his feet, and his eyes paid her ironic homage. Such a little while ago he would have said, whoever had been there, "How lovely you look, Veronica."

As she sat down Alise said with a sort of hard brightness, as though she, for one, was determined that the party should be gay, "This is a marvelous cocktail. Michael has had it mixed from a special recipe he learned down in the Sudan. It's terribly strong but very good; if we start like this we shall be quite tight."

"The C.O. down there gave it to me," said Michael. "It has vodka in it."

"What is it called?" asked Alise.

"*Nichevo*."

"Nothing matters?"

He smiled. "Will you have one, Verry?"

Veronica dropped into the deep cane chair opposite him, her eyes incredulous and hurt. It was so unlike Michael to talk like this, and Verry—he had never called her Verry before. That foolish little name belonged to a time long past, before she had belonged to him. It seemed to her somehow, when he said it, that she was no longer his wife, as though she was that girl he had met in Seadon, whose despair he had conquered, who had agreed to marry him without loving him, blindly in her hurt and fear, whose life was among careless young people like Alise and Alan and Billy Lennard, whose heart had belonged to a worthless young man.

She said gravely, "No, thank you."

"What, no drink?" he said recklessly. "But you must have one; this is a reunion. You look so lovely, Veronica; you must be gay as well. Through the whole trip I've been thinking of you, how gay and lovely you are, how dreadful it would be if you were not waiting for me, and you weren't, you see."

It was dreadful, like a terrible nightmare. It was not Michael who spoke at all.

"I didn't know——" she began, but he cut in: "Oh, it doesn't matter; it's just as well I should get used to the idea that you aren't always there, waiting for me to come. . . ." The strange voice went on, crisp, gay, brittle, and all the time his eyes were the eyes of a man in torture. He did not look at her, at her distressed face, the pain in her dark eyes.

"Michael!" she said sharply, as though trying to recall him. He was silent, his eyes meeting hers with a curious, burning intensity. She said again gently, pleadingly, "Michael," but she could not speak before Alise. Her throat contracted as though a weight of tears were gather-

ing; she pressed her hands tightly together. Would this dreadful evening never end?

"I've managed to get a special table," he said, "right on the dance floor. It's going to be a party. Alise tried to get hold of Billy to make up the foursome, but unfortunately he was out."

"There 'll be plenty of men there to dance with," said Alise with sudden acidity, "if Veronica is there."

Michael ordered more cocktails and drank again. He drank recklessly to "Your happiness, Veronica," as though he were toasting a bride, as though he were toasting a future in which he had no part. As they went into dinner she managed to whisper, "Did you see about a room, Michael?"

He glanced down at her swiftly and away again, and it seemed to her that his face was curiously white beneath his tan. "They had nothing," he said; "only one more single room—I've taken that."

It was like a door slammed brutally in her face, shutting her out of his heart and life. What had she done? How had she deserved this sudden avoidance? If he had seen her with Billy in the garden surely he would speak to her about it. It wasn't like Michael to be unfair, to be cruel. He would never listen to gossip and scandal, never believe anyone before her or the evidence of his own eyes. But it seemed to her that his words were curiously unreal, as though he were not speaking, as though he were not responsible for this reckless cruel gaiety. He could be taking this madness of Billy's seriously. He must know she belonged to him.

On the surface the evening was very gay. The crowd who had been on the beach that afternoon came in, well-dressed young officers and civilians. The pretty, fair Sigrid

with her distinguished diplomat father. Michael was indefatigable. He gathered a gay crowd about their table; drinks circulated regularly; he was witty, amusing; they were the center of a whirl of gaiety. Veronica danced nearly every dance; there always seemed to be someone at her side, waiting to claim her, danced with everyone but Michael. Skillfully, but with no lack of courtesy, he managed to avoid dancing with either she or Alise; with just the right touch he encouraged the young officers to press her for dances. It seemed as though he had not a look or thought or word to share with her alone. By midnight Veronica was pale with an intense, burning whiteness, her eyes dark, tragically big. She was dancing with Flying Officer Martin, who looked at her with concern.

"You don't look awfully fit, Mrs Carson; can I get you something? A spot of brandy?"

She smiled up at him gratefully. Michael had not noticed her exhaustion. It seemed as though he could not even look at her; only when she was dancing with someone else would she find his eyes fixed upon her with a strange, burning intensity, and he would look away the moment he met her glance.

"I'm not feeling too well," she admitted. "I've an awful head, but I think I'll slip away now without breaking up the party."

"I hope it didn't upset you this afternoon," he said. "It gives you a scare, not being able to get back to shore. You ought to take care; you don't want another dose of fever."

"That's what I'm a little nervous of," she said. "I've been shivering all evening." She glanced across toward their table; all three women, herself, Alise, Sigrid, were dancing; Michael was surrounded by a group of men, and roars of laughter were going up at something he had just said.

"I'll slip away; will you tell my husband? Tell him not to worry. I'll be quite all right."

He saw her to the door and then went across to Michael.

"Mrs Carson's sent her apologies, old man," he said. "She's gone upstairs. I must say she looks all in."

Michael's hard brilliancy of gaiety and wit collapsed like a pricked bubble; he suddenly looked drawn and tired.

"Is she ill?" he said.

Martin shook his head. "She's not really ill, but she looks jolly tired and pale. That bathing accident this afternoon shook her up, I think. It was jolly lucky she kept her head and called, or it might have been worse. Jolly bad show, so soon after having fever."

"I'll go up and see her," said Michael. "You'll excuse me?"

He went swiftly from the ballroom and took the lift to the first floor. He stopped outside her closed door, his hand half raised to knock, and then he heard the sound of her weeping. He stopped, and his hand fell to his side. His heart ached for her. Had it been so bitter then for her to say good-by that afternoon, to go through the evening without breaking down?

She had sent Billy away—for his sake? A tender little smile touched his grim face for a moment; his frozen eyes softened. "There was no need for that, Veronica," he murmured; "you should know I would not accept such a sacrifice."

She owed him nothing. She was as free as air to love whom she pleased—for a short while she had lit his grim life with beauty, and if she chose to leave him it was not for him to fight against it. He could not bear to hear her cry; it was like something tearing at his heart. He wanted to go in and take that slender shaking body in his arms

and comfort her, but if he touched her again he would never have the strength to go from her, to open the door for her to freedom and happiness. He stood there, his head bowed on his arm with an odd, boyish poignance, great man that he was, torn with agony at the sound of that broken sobbing. His hand touched the door softly, as though he would still that heart-rending sound, as though he were touching her shining, perfumed hair, as though he would soothe her tears away. Then he turned quickly and went back to his own room.

In her room Veronica stifled her tears and tried to quiet her shaking nerves. She was still feeling cold and shivering a little. She hoped desperately she was not in for another dose of fever. She admitted, reluctantly, that getting chilled as she had done that afternoon was quite sufficient to bring it on again.

Perhaps Michael had not come up yet. He could not very well leave just when everyone was enjoying the dancing. She undressed, wrapped herself in a negligee, brushed her hair automatically and crept into bed. She still felt cold, and her head ached intolerably. After a while she fell into a troubled sleep, waking at intervals, sometimes she put out her hand as though she would find him sleeping next to her, but Michael did not come.

She woke late the following morning, feeling heavy and not rested, and asked the chambermaid to go along to Michael's room and tell him she would not be down to breakfast. The chambermaid, a tiny Frenchwoman, her olive skin withered to ocher through long years of Egyptian heat, opened her black eyes in surprise.

"But, madame, m'sieu is no longer here. He left the hotel last night to return to El-Hussar! Is it possible that he did not inform Madame?"

Chapter Twenty

THE CHAMBERMAID went out and Veronica sat staring at her breakfast tray. At the dainty china, the toast, the yellow butter, the rich colors of the fruit.

Michael was not in the hotel; he had gone back to the camp—left her without a word. For one long dreadful moment she could not move, could not think, an aching little eternity in which her soul groped blindly for something to hold to, something to stand on. Michael had gone and for a moment everything blackened; her world vanished, leaving her in a gray, purposeless limbo where there was no meaning to life. For some weeks, ever since she had been ill, she had seen and worried over the estrangement between herself and Michael, but she had told herself that she had only to wait until they were back at the bungalow, until they were alone together. Once they had the chance to talk it out they would be all right. But Michael was not going to give her that chance; he had gone away.

She tightened her hold on her nerves, determined to think clearly and not to let this thing get her down. She

put the tray down on the bedside table, the food and tea untouched, threw back the satin covers and reached with her bare feet for her slippers. She must see Alise—Alise had the key to this terrible thing—she would know if Michael had seen that foolish, unavoidable farewell of Billy's in the palm avenue yesterday. If he had he might have thought . . .

She rose sharply, slipping her pale blue dressing gown about her, and as she did so a strange new nausea came over her. She felt dizzy and wretchedly sick. She stumbled across to the dressing table and sat down, gazing at her reflection with wide, curious eyes. Suddenly she knew with a wonderful clearness that what she had suspected during the last few weeks, what the nurses at the hospital had hinted at, was really true. Her weakness after the bathing accident yesterday had not been a threat of returning fever; she was going to have a child. Michael's baby. Perhaps the boy she had longed and prayed for would grow tall and straight, bronze-haired and blue-eyed like Michael, and Michael had gone, left her, doubting her love, doubting her faithfulness, gone without a word of explanation or farewell.

She had so wanted this child. She had longed for it deeply and intensely, this ultimate flowering of their love, and now when it had come her love was slipping away from her, lost in a sea of doubt and misunderstanding. Her white cheeks suddenly flushed with a lovely color; courage filled her and a purpose came to her unhappy eyes. She rose and went swiftly along the corridor to Alise's room.

Alise was beginning the long and elaborate preparation for her day. Bathed and perfumed, wrapped in pale pink silk with fronds of ostrich feather spraying round her smooth shoulders and over her bare ankles, her feet thrust

into satin heelless mules, she sat before her dressing table. A little retinue surrounded her. There was her maid, a hairdresser and a manicurist waiting to begin the daily ritual of molding her golden curls and lacquering her finger- and toenails. Several dresses were spread on the bed, and the maid was holding up another for her inspection.

Alise sighed and leaned back, contemplating it thoughtfully. She, too, had been informed of Michael's departure. Yesterday had been, from her point of view, a most successful day; the dance last night had been a fitting climax. A triumph filled her like that of a cat holding a terrified, fluttering bird in its deadly velvet claws. She did not know why she hated Veronica so; indeed, Alise was never given to self-analysis; she only knew that she gave her a vague, irritating sense of inferiority, which was maddening to one who had been brought up to consider herself the center of the universe.

Well, it was all over now—that complacent triumph of love. It would really be quite amusing to commiserate with Veronica, and it would be the most intriguing thing if, now Michael had left her, she really threw her cap over the windmill as far as Billy was concerned. Judging by her own reactions, Alise expected it. That would be a pretty scandal. That would destroy the reputation *à la* Caesar's wife that clung so stubbornly about young Mrs Carson. Patting her soft golden hair, Alise decided that after that she would leave Egypt. It seemed to offer very little amusement in the future.

If she expected Veronica to appear pale and weeping, distraught and anxious or hysterically angry she was disappointed. She was surprised when, in answer to her call of, "Come in, Verry darling," a strangely radiant Veronica appeared.

Alise sat up abruptly and stared. There was something about Veronica which she could not place, something not quite earthly. An inner, spiritual completion, a subdued glitter of beauty for which no name could be found—like the radiance of the moon before it has topped the hill crest, like bird song when the finger of dawn touches the world—and it transcended the simple beauty of her girlhood and young wifhood in a wonderful manner, as though she wore an unseen coronet. In her long, graceful blue gown, her dark hair cloudy about her shoulders, she was like one of the dark-eyed young madonnas that Raphael loved to paint. Yet there was none of her usual serenity in her deep eyes; there was a purpose and a strength about her which, to Alise, was very disconcerting.

She decided to be noncommittal.

"Good morning, darling; come in and sit down; lovely day, isn't it? Though Emil tells me it's windy inland." She indicated to the fidgeting hairdresser that he could begin. The man was the most fashionable hairdresser in Alexandria; she had already kept him waiting fifteen minutes, and his day was booked full of appointments. Conscious that he would be late for an émigré Russian countess, one of her dearest rivals, Alise deliberately lingered. "Have you had breakfast? I'm spending the day with the Montescus, the bankers, you know, they have that lovely place along the front."

Veronica did not sit down. She came and stood beside the dressing table and said quickly, "Send these people away."

Alise's mouth opened in sheer astonishment; she had never been spoken to like that in her life. "But my dear, I must have my hair done. I'm late as it is and——"

"Your hair can wait," said Veronica in the same tone.

"I want to speak to you. Will you please send them away."

There was something in Veronica's eyes that warned Alise, warned her in the way Michael's voice had warned her the evening before. They were curiously alike when they were aroused. But a scene before the hairdresser would be a mistake; it would be repeated in every drawing room in Alexandria before the day was out.

"Would you mind waiting, Emil?" she said quickly. "Mrs Carson won't be a minute."

The hairdresser cast up his eyes ceilingward and withdrew followed by the girl manicurist and Alise's maid. Alise leaned forward and began to pat cream into her face, watching Veronica covertly through the mirror.

"Now," she said, smiling, with an attempt at lightness, "What is this all about?"

"Alise, when you had that message yesterday—that Michael was wired in—you knew I was waiting for it. You knew where I was. Why didn't you send a page down to the beach so I could go and meet him?"

Alise shrugged, wiped the face cream off carefully and said, "My dear, I didn't want to spoil your flirtation."

"You know there was no flirtation. Perhaps you didn't want me to know Michael had returned." Her eyes were bright, accusing, and furiously Alise found she could not meet them. "Billy walked back to the hotel with me; he chose to behave foolishly. I want you to tell me, did Michael see?"

Alise lit a cigarette and shrugged. "There is no need for you to cross-examine me. One would think I deliberately engineered all this. Is it my fault if you misbehave?"

"Perhaps you will answer my question."

"Really, Veronica, you can't expect to keep both your husband and your lover on a string indefinitely. Sooner

or later one of them is bound to find he's been made a fool of."

Veronica whitened. "So he did see? And knowing how difficult Billy has been, how I have tried to avoid him, you let him think the worst of me and spoke no word in my defense?"

Something in Alise snapped. She was furious that Veronica should speak to her like this. The control which had for so long hidden her hatred, her jealousy, her thwarted, bitter longing, slipped from her, leaving her raw, bitter self exposed to Veronica's quiet gaze.

"Yes, I let him think Billy is your lover. I wanted him to think it. Well, why not? I've owed you this for a long while, ever since Alan Grierson married me. Now Michael has gone, so perhaps you understand how I feel, how I still feel. Now perhaps you know what it is to lose someone you love. Perhaps last night gave you a taste of what I had to suffer, the man you love looking at you with contempt in his eyes."

"You forget," said Veronica gently, "that it was you who took Alan from me. If he couldn't love you that was no fault of mine."

Alise sprang to her feet and paced angrily about the room.

"You have been so sure of yourself, sure that you had what I could never know. I swore that I'd take that look from your eyes, and I have. . . ."

She swung round, carried away by her furious words, swung round and stopped, speechless at the look in Veronica's face. All the anger and accusation had gone from it. She stood with her hands clasped quietly in front of her, watching Alise. Veronica was sorry for her!

It was the final straw; at one blow all her malicious

triumph was destroyed. She could throw mud at Veronica, soil and damage her love, but she could never take it away from her. Whatever Michael believed about her now, she still would have the glorious memory of those months when they had been happy together; all this was written in her soft dark eyes, that and something more. A deeper, more wonderful knowledge than Alise could understand. Her shattered nerves were on edge; she could not bear to face the fact that Veronica was sorry for her.

"Don't you care?" she cried shrilly. "Has that failed to touch you too? You're alone now; don't you understand? It will take more than your usual act of sweet, trusting innocence to make Michael believe in you again. You're alone as I am alone; you'll know what it is to be despised by the man you love."

"I'll never be alone again," said Veronica quietly. "I'm going to have a baby, Michael's baby. I'm going this morning to find him and tell him; he'll listen to me and he'll understand."

"You're going to——" Alise stopped, her face white, her eyes dark with frustration and misery. Ever since she had been old enough to go about in the world her life had been made up of artificial experiences, artificial emotions. Clothes, money, flirting, night clubs, to be smart, to do smart things, to be in smart places, to give nothing, to take everything, to be admired. She had tried to buy love as she would have bought a jewel or a new dress. She had no time for simplicities and no understanding of them; she had never been taught to believe they held value. And then Veronica said in that quiet, soft voice of hers, "I'm going to have a baby," and her brilliant world of glittering artificialities collapsed about her into so much shoddy tinsel. She realized with a terrible sense of futility that she was

young and her youth was already arid and wasted within her, that Veronica, whom she thought was alone, Veronica, whose man had left her, still held everything that she would never have, never know.

Hysteria claimed her in a black wave of despair—a crystal lamp went shattering to the floor.

"Get out," she screamed; "get out—I can't bear it—I can't bear to see you. Get out!"

Veronica went toward her quickly, alarmed; she would have tried to help Alise, but she threw herself on the bed in a fit of hysterical weeping, feet and hands beating and tearing at the silken covers. "Go away," she moaned; "go away—leave me alone."

"I'll send your maid to you," said Veronica. She hesitated for a moment; there was nothing she could do. Her very presence there increased Alise's distress. She said quietly, "Good-by," and went out of the room.

Left alone, Alise's sobs became quieter—presently she mopped her tear-wet cheeks and looked with disgust at the ravaged face her mirror reflected. Her young, red, thin-lipped mouth was bitter and twisted, her blue eyes tired, like a city dweller who has always looked on dusty streets, never on green fields. When her maid came she was composed, but with a dreadful bitter composure. She rang down to the hotel office for her bill and ordered her maid to pack. It was autumn; there was quite a pleasant little season on the Riviera. She might cable her parents to meet her there; they at any rate adored her sufficiently to restore her self-esteem. Anyway, there would be parties and gambling, dancing, new young men to pay court to her, admiration. She had always lived on it, and it was becoming the drug with which she shut out reality. She might go to Paris or New York, anywhere life was lived at

the crazy pitch of merry-go-round, anywhere where there was no time to think. Whatever happened, she must get away from Alexandria; she must never see Veronica again.

Veronica went back to her room and began to dress. She was pale, but a strange emotional calm had come to her. She was beyond hoping her life would straighten out of its own accord. She was desperate; she had to fight for her happiness. She must find Michael, and he must listen to her. She dressed quickly, telephoned to the desk for her bill and asked them to send a message to the native servants' quarters for Mustapha to get the car out and wait for her outside. The sun was still brilliant, but inland the sky had that peculiar brassy, hard yellow that indicated the gibli, the dreaded dust storms that would sweep in from the desert.

Just as she had finished packing there was a knock at the door, and in reply to her call the chambermaid came in. In her hand she held the porcelain cherub Veronica had given to Michael; it was broken into three pieces.

"I found this in the hearth in m'sieu's room," she said. "It must have fallen—oh, madame, please, mon Dieu, what is it I have said? Do not be so upset."

For suddenly Veronica began to cry. All the strength went out of her. Seeing the curved pink-and-white baby limbs broken, the tiny azure wings cracked, it seemed to her that Alise might have triumphed, that she might really have lost Michael; it spoke so much of a sudden, violent, despairing movement that had crashed its fragile prettiness down on the ground. The little Frenchwoman was distressed.

"But, madame, it can easily be mended; I myself could mend it. Batouch in the bazaar will, for a couple of piasters, mend it so you will not see a crack."

Veronica controlled her tears with an effort and managed to smile. She took the little broken cupid gently, wrapped up the pieces in a handkerchief and packed it carefully into the corner of her dressing case.

"It will not be the same," she said.

A wise smile came into the little woman's beady black eyes.

"It will be better, *chère* madame. For knowing how fragile a thing is, how easily it can be broken, one guards it more. In future you will take good care, is it not so?"

Veronica caught the kindly innuendo and smiled a little mistily. Ah, it was true; if only this awful misunderstanding and separation could be ended then surely the memory of this danger, this awful wound of parting would make them guard their love. If only it could be mended, this love of theirs, as the china mender would repair the little porcelain ornament, then there would be no more danger. When Michael knew of the child that was to come, her child and his, that would set a seal on their love that nothing could destroy.

Odd how the most unlikely people could fill one with sudden courage and hope. She tipped the little woman generously, a poor repayment for her worldly wise optimism, and went down to the car.

The comparatively short drive out to El-Hussar seemed interminable; as they drove the sun lost its white brilliance and was hidden behind the brassy glare of dust that hid the sky. The wind plucked at the rare palm trees until they tossed and strained like bunches of green feathers, and Veronica's mouth and eyes began to feel parched and gritty. Mustapha rolled his dark eyes at the sky and descended into profound gloom.

"Big storm over desert, sahiba," he said ominously;

"everyone stay home." Dust and sand storms meant no patrols would go up, which usually signified impromptu parties and extra work for Mustapha.

Veronica's heart lightened; if no patrols went out it meant Michael would be in camp—never had the journey been so slow. Never had the sky seemed so ominous and oppressive or the trams to clash along with such a raucous scream of brakes; never had Mustapha, always with a reverently protective attitude toward his sahiba, driven with such maddening, painstaking care. When they stopped at a crossing on the outskirts of the town to let a Bedouin, dignified as a biblical picture, drive his flock of goats across the road she motioned Mustapha into the back seat and herself took the wheel. As soon as the rank-smelling, agate-eyed flock had passed she rammed down the accelerator hard.

Chapter Twenty-One

AS SHE DROVE INTO THE CAMP impatience possessed her, impatience to see Michael. At El-Hussar the gibli was really set; the sky was a yellow fog; the howling wind blew dust into one's clothes and eyes and hair; visibility was difficult. If Michael had gone out on patrol or was flying mail to Cairo he might not be back; machines would be advised not to leave for the storm district. It might be hours before she saw him. She would have to possess herself in patience until he returned.

It was dark in the bungalow, and the place looked dusty and neglected. Ali, inclined to be lazy, had let things go in her absence and Mustapha's, and Michael had not noticed. As she took off her hat and dropped it onto the bed she heard Mustapha's voice raised in anger and Ali's exaggerated howl of anguish as a chastizing hand caught his ear. She smiled. Mustapha was quick tempered and heavy handed but very efficient. Within an hour, as far as the dust storm would permit, the bungalow would be neat

and shining; flowers would appear miraculously in the vases; order would reign. A loose shutter banged dismally in the wind, and in spite of the tightly closed nettings dust and sand were beginning to seep onto the window ledges.

She ran a comb through her hair; it felt heavy and full of dust. It was nearly dark, although it was close on mid-day. She did not feel like lunch. It was unlikely that Michael, not knowing she had returned, would come to the bungalow. If he was at El-Hussar he would lunch in the mess. She would run across to the Williamses' bungalow and find out if he were in camp. After the company of Alise and Marta it would be a relief to see the small, impudent, wickedly humorous face of Elwyn Williams again.

Veronica caught sight of her own face in the mirror with a sense of shock. She was thinking of these trivial things, the house, her servants, her friends, just to avoid thinking of Michael. What would he say when he found she had come home? Would he listen to her? He *must* listen to her. The cold panic of the early morning, when she had first heard that he had gone, descended upon her again. Supposing he would not see her? Supposing this thing had gone too far with him? Supposing, after all, it was irreparable; people did sometimes fall out of love. She covered her hands with a little shivering cry. It couldn't be; she didn't deserve that fate should be so cruel. "Not now, Michael, not now, my love; now that life could be so wonderful for us. Not now when I need you so much. Oh, dear God, send him back to me with love in his heart."

It was no use. She could do nothing else but wait. She forced herself to be calm, washed the grit from her eyes and face and hands and combed her hair. Michael had given her an Arab robe, a long-hooded white burnoose, so she wrapped it about her shoulders, pulled the hood up

round her hair and thrust the door open against the wind. A whistling ghost of red grit caught at her, whirled her along the lane between the rasping cactus plants. Elwyn Williams thrust open the door and pulled her inside, breathless and gasping. One look at her pale face showed Veronica that something was wrong.

"I came to ask if you knew where Michael is," she began. Then, "Why, what is it? What's wrong?"

The sparkling little woman pulled a comical face.

"Heavens, do I look as tragic as that? Take your cloak off and come into the sitting room." In the cheerful little lounge she mechanically put out cigarettes and cocktails, talking all the time with automatic cheerfulness. "You know, I ought never to have married an aviator. The suspense is 'orrid."

"But what is it?" demanded Veronica. "I've only just arrived. What has happened?"

"I'm glad you came back," said Elwyn. "It's good to have you here. The Avery woman came in for a while, but she was so complacent because her husband happened to be safe on terra firma that I couldn't stand her. It's all right; don't look at me like that, Veronica. Michael looked like death when he went off this morning, but then perhaps it was the light. You know how gray it is at dawn, and this holocaust hadn't started then, and——"

Veronica sprang to her feet, took Elwyn by the shoulders.

"Tell me what has happened," she cried.

"Oh, my dear." Elwyn's little brown face was quite pale; her hand suddenly gripped Veronica's. She had that look of listening that Veronica knew only too well . . . when a plane is overdue, and one waits and listens anxiously for the sound of an engine over the tarmac.

"Halton, the Cape flyer, is down somewhere on the desert. The first search patrol went at dawn . . . Michael and John. Then this started." Her head indicated brusquely the howling dust fiend outside. "They went early, just before dawn. As soon as Michael arrived from Bulkeley."

"But," said Veronica brittily, "that was early morning."

"Yes. They're overdue. They wirelesslyed them in over an hour ago, but they haven't come yet. No patrol can go to look for them until this stops; it would be suicide. Of course," she added brightly, "they're probably somewhere quite safe; in a bar in Cairo, never dreaming that anyone is worrying over them." Her voice broke. She knew this was impossible; the station would be informed if the patrol had landed at any drome. "Why didn't I marry a civil servant or a farmer or perhaps a nice respectable provision merchant, anyone who had the sense to stay on the ground and not go flying about over the desert when all hell's let loose?"

Veronica put out warm young arms and caught the tiny woman to her. For a moment they stayed clinging together, silently striving to comfort each other. Then they moved apart, not looking at one another, each fighting the sudden, overwhelming longing for the relief of tears.

In the tiny dining room lunch was laid for two. Flowers gleamed in the vases; from the kitchen came the faint, savory smell of cooking, but everywhere in the bungalow was the sinister sense of listening, of striving to listen above the remorseless clamor of the storm. The servants spoke in hushed voices, as though they, too, had caught the anxiety of the two women sitting in silence together, listening, listening. Suddenly there was the sound of booted feet on the veranda outside and a thunderous knock on the door. Elwyn Williams glanced apologetically

at Veronica and flew to answer it. A smiling airman saluted her.

"Mr Williams wired in, ma'am," he said cheerfully. "Thought you'd like to know. Had engine trouble. Should be here within the hour."

For a minute Veronica didn't know whether her friend was going to laugh or cry. Her little brown face wrinkled up like a monkey's to control her tears, and even as it wrinkled she seemed to come alive again. Her eyes twinkled mistily. "Oh, what a goose I am," she exclaimed. "Thank you, thank you. Anyone would think they'd been missing for days, the way I've been carrying on."

The man answered the silent agony of question in Veronica's eyes. "I'm sorry, ma'am, we've heard nothing from Mr Carson yet. Mr Williams has been ordered to proceed to the base without looking for him further. They'll all go up, once this——" He controlled his language with a visible effort and finished up: "When *this* has stopped."

The two women went back into the bungalow. Veronica felt drained of all emotion; she couldn't feel. Never in all their married life had Michael been in danger. She tried to tell herself that it was only a few hours. He might have had a forced landing; the dust storm might have brought him down . . . engine trouble, something slight . . . they would soon locate him once the storm was over. She would not let herself think of the myriad dangers of desert flying, the mirages, the dust storms which alone were enough to bring a machine down, the miles of broken ground and soft deep sand where no pilot could land with safety and far south the wild and sometimes unfriendly tribesmen. She covered her face with a wordless little sob. If he had gone away with love in his heart for her it would

not have been so awful. If Alise could see her now she would indeed feel revenged. If anything should happen, if he should not know that she had never ceased to love him, if he should never know of their child . . .

Elwyn sat down beside her and slipped a friendly hand through her arm. "Don't, darling," she said softly. "Don't think of the awful things. Try and think of the things which might have happened. He might be standing by Halton. He might have flown to Cairo; it's nearer, you know."

"If he was in Cairo they would have wired," said Veronica wearily.

Mrs Williams' lips tightened. Unless Michael had crashed he would have sent a message.

"Try not to think," she said. "Stay over here; it may not be so bad. Michael will be all right. He's not the kind to get into any trouble; he's too good a pilot."

Veronica pressed her hand gratefully.

"I'll stay a little while," she said, "until John comes. Then I must go back home."

Mrs Williams said suddenly, partly out of natural curiosity, partly because she cared deeply for Michael and Veronica and she wanted to know the truth.

"Veronica, there was never any truth in those rumors about you and young Lennard, was there?"

Veronica smiled. With anyone else she might have resented the bluntly put question, but not Elwyn's transparent honesty. She shook her head. "No. Billy behaved madly; he made it very difficult for me. I was careful not to encourage him, but Michael has gone, believing there was something in it, I'm afraid. You see, it suited someone to mislead him, someone who doesn't like me."

Mrs Williams rose, her black eyes snapping.

"You needn't tell me," she said. "The Grierson woman. I knew she was after your blood the minute I set eyes on her."

Veronica rose a little wearily. "Let's not talk about her. She's to be pitied in some ways. Anyway, she's leaving Egypt shortly."

"Thank heaven," said Elwyn fervently.

"I didn't mean to tell anyone about it," said Veronica, "but when you asked me I felt I had to. Perhaps you caught me at a weak moment; somehow I just had to."

"I know. I won't say a thing. Anyway, you wait here with us. Perhaps John will be able to tell us something when he comes in."

They waited together until Williams' machine came limping in, circling blindly over the drome through the dust murk to find the tarmac safely. Waiting for him, the two women smoked and talked in a desultory manner about everything and nothing, nothing of what was in their minds. Veronica did not tell her friend about her baby. She felt she could not speak of it to anyone before Michael knew, and she would not admit to the awful fear that Michael might never know.

After a while Flight Lieutenant Williams came in, stiff and tired, his eyes red-rimmed with the stinging dust, circular weals round his eyes where his goggles had sunk into his sunburned flesh. The Halton Cape venture was proving unlucky. After making good time at the start of his record attempt the civil aviator had come down in the desert, far to the southwest. Nothing had been heard of him for over twelve hours. Michael and Williams had taken out the first two planes to go and search for him. Williams had been down in the desert with engine trouble when the dust storm swept in from the vast rolling dunes of the mid-

Sahara. He and Michael had separated to search for Halton, but there was no sign of Michael's machine when he finally took off from the mud flat where he had been making repairs, and visibility was so bad that the task of looking either for the lost Halton or for Michael was an impossibility, but he cruised in the vain hope of finding Michael, until the message went out ordering all planes to return to the drome.

The tall man looked utterly exhausted. His usual ruddy and cheerful face was white and strained. He was in the mood when, as a service pilot stationed in the mid-East, he would eloquently damn all record breakers to eternity. There were two things in his mind and two things only—bath and bed. Elwyn put out her tongue rudely at her husband. Neither of them would show their emotions. Now the danger was past their flippant sarcasm descended on them like a cloak. Perhaps their emotions were too deep to be shown, for everyone knew they were a most devoted couple.

"You're a nice one, I must say," she said lightly, but Veronica could detect the tremble in her voice. "Here was I all ready to draw the insurance, and you turn up, alive and kicking."

He grinned and pulled her to his side, but his face darkened ominously as he turned to Veronica. Her wide dark eyes asked him for news and comfort, but he could give her neither.

"I'm terribly sorry, Veronica," he said gravely. "I can't give you any news. We separated over the desert; no one has the faintest idea where Halton may be, so we had to cover a wide ground. I searched until I was called in, but you can't see a foot in this murk. I'll get a sleep and go out again the minute they allow us to take off."

She pressed his arm. "Thank you, John. How long d'you think it 'll last?"

He shrugged. "Heaven knows; until the wind changes, and that's as Allah wills it. As soon as it drops search patrols will go out from the inland stations too. Everyone's been warned. But don't worry yet, child. Pilots have been missing for days and turned up, smiling. Come and have a drink."

She shook her head. "No, thank you; I'll go back to the bungalow." She could see they wanted to be alone, and she didn't want her anxiety to intrude on their relief and happiness.

She wrapped her long cloak and hood about her and went back home. The gritty wind was intolerable. By the time she stumbled through the door her eyes were red with it. She bathed and changed into the slacks and shirt she invariably wore at home during the daytime and went into the lounge. The lights were on, for the shutters were closed against the seeping dust storm. Ali brought her a light, appetizing lunch on a tray. She tried to eat but could not. She picked up a book and let it drop again; some needlework, but her nerveless fingers would not work. She unpacked her clothes from her suitcase and hung them up in her wardrobe, tried to find something to do, to occupy her mind, but the afternoon wore on, and always she returned to the window of the lounge, peering through the shutters, trying vainly to see through yellow whorls of dust that the howling wind danced along the cactus avenue, ears strained to listen for the sound of engines above the shriek of the wind, eyes forever on the brazen yellow murk of the sky, listening, waiting, trying to pray.

At four Mustapha himself brought in the tea tray. He was obviously worried, perhaps just as much over her lack

of appetite as Michael's absence. On the tray was a letter postmarked from Bulkeley and the Chelsea china cupid, most beautifully repaired. The three breaks were now the merest hairlines on the smooth porcelain.

"That son of evil," he said solemnly in Arabic, meaning his compatriot in the kitchen, "is clever at such things. I bade him repair it for the Sahiba."

"Thank you, Mustapha."

Veronica set it on the table. It gave her an odd little return of confidence to see it there, the gay, absurd pink-and-white baby riding his lamb with its rein of dainty flowers. Idly she picked up the letter, and for a moment it seemed as though her heart stopped beating, for it was Michael's writing. It had been redirected from the *Magnifique*. It must have missed the first morning post and had been sent after her to the camp. She tore it open with trembling fingers, and as she read her face went white with horror, with pity, with love. The letter was so simple, so much Michael, as though he were standing in the room speaking to her.

"There was no need to send him away for my sake, Veronica. Couldn't you trust my love to set you free? Gratitude can be an evil thing sometimes, my dear. What could you, with all your loveliness, bring me except a hell of agony if I found, as sooner or later I should have found, that I no longer had your heart? To break off cleanly and honestly even is terrible when one still loves, but it is better than an aching uncertainty, a creeping horror of doubt. Remember, I owe Billy my life, and therefore I also owe him this past year's wonder of happiness, while you still believed you loved me. I do not blame you, Veronica; youth and loneliness, the Mediterranean night and

the scent of lemon trees, they can betray us all. So you see, my heart's darling, I owe both of you a great debt now. Remember—

*"Though it were long since,
Though it were passed over,
It was romance,
And deathless, my lover . . ."*

D'you remember when we read that together, Veronica? Those few months with you were mine, Veronica, and whatever happens between us now, they, at any rate, are deathless for me. . . ."

Veronica rose, white to her lips, standing there, staring in front of her sightlessly, a blind woman, trying to think, trying to believe what she had read. He believed Billy and she were really in love; circumstances had made him believe it. He had thought her love for him must be the brief betrayal of youth, grateful and romantic. He believed that; the scene at Karnak, the scene in the palm grove yesterday came back to her, the day of the riots in the bazaar. Why had Billy been such a thoughtless cruel fool? Now Michael had gone; he had flown away to look for Halton and he had not returned. A cold fear gripped her; her hand went over her lips to stifle the cry that rose to them. Did he mean never to return? "Whatever happens between us now . . ." What could happen? Had he chosen a terrible, nameless way of setting her free? The words rose to her lips in a desperate cry, "Michael, Michael, for God's sake, come back to me!" Suddenly she remembered that night in Seadon long ago. The night when she had thought her life stripped of meaning and the gleaming white chalk pit offering her oblivion so tempt-

ingly below . . . the impulse toward it checked by Michael's hand on her arm, Michael's wise, kindly voice . . . drawing her back. . . . "It isn't a certain way out. . . ." But Michael now was not seeking "a way out"; he was seeking to set her free. Michael saying, "My chalk pit was the drome a thousand feet below," and now was it the desert, on and on, flying until fuel was exhausted, coming down into the soft, deadly sand? And she was so helpless; she had no means of reaching him, of preventing it, of telling him the truth. She understood this love of his for her, all absorbing, tender, sheltering, willing to make any sacrifice. Somehow she must reach him; somehow she must tell him the truth. He must know her utter adoration for him; he must know of the child, their child; he must come back to her.

She could not cry; she was beyond crying. She was in the grip of this terrible, nameless fear. She would have liked to have run out to the tarmac and implored them to search for him, in spite of the storm, to take her with them. But that was impossible; that was not for her. She must stay and wait and pray. But she could not pray; the words would not come. She felt suddenly terribly alone, terribly helpless.

"No one but God and I knows what is in my heart." That was what the Arabs said, and it was true. No one knew. There were she and Michael, the center of each other's lives, creating a world of their own out of their love, and yet even they, bound together by the deepest ties of a wonderful passion, had not known what lay in the other's heart. Michael had not been able to see through the string of coincidence that had surrounded her, had not been able to see that Billy had meant nothing to her, except that as his friend she had wished to be kind to him,

and she had always felt in his debt, the debt of Michael's life and her happiness.

Her mind fastened on the name. If she and Michael owed Billy anything it was wiped out now. It was through him, his absurd, reckless, selfish infatuation that this thing had ever happened. Almost before she realized what she was doing she went to the telephone and called La Repose. After a few minutes' delay the voice of Marta's Egyptian houseboy answered. She asked for Billy, and presently he spoke, complacently surprised and delighted to hear her name.

"Verry, at last. Am I forgiven?"

"Billy, will you come over here? Michael is lost in the desert. They won't allow anyone to take off in search until the dust storm abates. I want to speak to you."

Something in her voice frightened him. It destroyed at once all his illusions. In a moment all the conceit, all his selfish desire for her was killed. Her voice when she said "Michael is lost. . . ." It had the suppressed terror of a frightened child's. If Michael was lost she was lost too. He said quickly, reassuringly, "Don't worry, Verry. I'll come straight over."

It seemed hours before the taxi dropped him at the door, and he came quickly into the bungalow. As Mustapha opened the door to admit him the wind crashed through the house, lifting mats, slamming doors. Outside the tiny, stunted fig tree that found root in the meager earth by the door was straining as though it would tear itself from the ground. Billy looked at her white, stunned face, and his conscience clawed at him with baleful hands. What had he done to her . . . Veronica, whom he had professed to love? She seemed so small, so pitifully young, pitifully lost. He saw what an armor and what a thin

armor had been her smartness, the polished assurance that she had acquired out East. Underneath she was still the Veronica that he had known in Seadon; the very young, very frightened Veronica who had given herself so unreservedly into Michael Carson's protective arms. Billy came over to her side, would have taken her hands and spoken comforting words, but she just pushed Michael's letter into his hands and turned away.

He read it through, his reckless young face strained and serious. Presently he looked up.

"He knew—all the time—that I was making love to you?"

She nodded silently, then said in a queer, forced voice, as though it hurt her contracted throat to force the words out:

"He saw you kiss me that afternoon in the palm avenue. What could he think? All the time you were fooling he thought you meant it. You see, he is older than you or I. And now he's gone. Billy"—she came close to him—"I'm frightened. Suppose he did not mean to come back?"

"What d'you mean?" He scowled. He just wouldn't let himself think that. It couldn't be true. "He couldn't help having to go and look for this chap Halton."

She turned and faced him, her eyes black with pain.

"But all search planes have been ordered to return, and he has not returned. Once before," she said fiercely, "you saved his life. I thought I owed you something for that. I owe you nothing now, nothing but hate unless Michael comes back to me."

"Verry, forgive me, I've been a fool. I didn't think——" The timeworn excuses sounded futile. Who ever thinks, until tragedy stalks in and the mistake is irrevocable?

"Surely Michael wouldn't purposely——?"

"He might if he thinks I want to be free," she said with quiet desperation. "If only I could tell him. Billy, couldn't you take me? Couldn't you get a machine and take me?"

"You're speaking wildly, Verry. No one has permission to leave while this wind continues. And I certainly couldn't take you!" he cried. "But why should Michael do this? I can't understand. . . ."

"Because he loves me, and because he loves me my happiness means more to him than mere possession. You can't understand that, Billy, because you have never loved."

"How can you say that?"

"You only desired me, Billy, and in the selfishness of your desire you may have killed Michael. If Michael is killed I shall be killed, too; even if I go on living inside me I shall be dead."

"Oh God, Veronica. Forgive me."

Suddenly her anger against him collapsed. She was weeping hopelessly against him now. "Oh, Billy, Billy, find him for me. Billy, Michael and I are going to have a child. I can't bear to think he might die out there and never know and never know how much I love him."

His hands dropped from her shoulders. In a second his reckless young face seemed to mature; his life of gay pretense turned to stark reality. He put Veronica away from him with gentle hands, and his lips, unknown to her, touched her soft dark hair.

"Don't worry, Verry, any more. I'll go and look for him." He spoke with quiet determination. "I'll get permission. If I don't bring him back I won't come myself. I won't dare to, Verry, after what I have done to you and Michael."

He pressed her shoulder lightly and went out, leaving

her alone. The wind snatched at him like an evil monster, beating its gritty fingers against his face. He glanced at the brazen sky. Get permission? He made a wry little face. That seemed unlikely. But he'd go and speak to Williams; he was a reasonable fellow; he might speak to the C.O. If not . . . ?

He shrugged his shoulders, half in mockery, half in defiance of the elements and the powers that be, as he went through the Williamses' gate, bending against the wind.

Williams would tell him approximately where he had last seen Michael. He could not live and face that look in Veronica's eyes. Permission or not, if it were humanly possible to take off into the storm he would get a machine up; he would find Michael if it cost him his life. If he had to go through hell he would bring him back to her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

AS BILLY APPROACHED the Williamses' bungalow, head well down against the wind, he could see a light in the dining room, faint cracks of yellow showing through the shutters. Williams hadn't turned in yet. That was something. His mind ran round in circles, trying to think what to do, trying to form a plan of action. As the yellow dust spat into his face, drying his lips and nostrils, stinging his eyes, he knew that the very idea of getting permission to take off was ridiculous.

But he couldn't stand this inaction. Permission or not, something had to be done. If he could get some idea where Michael was. Williams could tell him that at least, if he would. That would be something to work on. He just couldn't think of that look in Veronica's eyes. What had she said? "If Michael is killed I shall be killed, too; even if I go on living inside me I shall be dead."

Thoughtlessness. It was the stumbling block of youth. You went on so carelessly, thinking of nothing but your

own desires, of molding life your own way, of getting every possible pleasure out of it; not thinking of other people, not until you realized your own criminal carelessness and lack of thought had destroyed them. Like the speed fiend who does not see the danger of his driving until one day he kills a child, and then it is too late. One buys experience with tragedy. But this was one time it wasn't going to be too late. He had to bring Michael back. He owed that to Veronica.

He knocked casually on the door of Williams' bungalow, and when it was opened thrust determinedly past the protesting houseboy.

"The Sahib Williams was tired; he was just going to bed. The sahiba had said no visitors." Billy stalked unheedingly past his gesticulating, protesting figure and into the little dining room. Elwyn Williams and her husband looked up at him with the weary but stubborn patience of people who are determined to resist the company of even their friendliest friends and spend the evening alone.

"Hallo," said Billy cheerily. "Just heard you'd come in. Nice work, old lad. I was beginning to think you'd be a stretcher case when next my eyes were gladdened by the sight of you."

Williams rose, bored, patient, determined. "Listen, my lad, I'll receive any congratulations on my miraculous escape in the morning. Right now I'm turning in. Elwyn will give you a whisky and soda, and you can go somewhere else and get chatty with someone who can keep his eyes open."

In spite of the inferno of wind and dust outside it was curiously quiet in the small, white-walled room. The fans were still and silent, for their relieving draft would only have stirred up the fine yellow dust that settled every-

where. It gave the atmosphere a curious, unreal, hazy look, like the smoke haze after men have sat up a night at cards. Only this haze was yellow, and you could feel it, gritty and dry, in the corners of your eyes and against your tongue. Outside the grit screeched against the bungalow, as though a giant were rubbing the outer walls with sandpaper. Billy grinned, stopped the soda Elwyn was splashing into his glass with the familiar "When!" and drank it down nearly neat. It stung into his veins, tightening his grip on himself. He had needed that.

"Fair's fair," he said laconically. "It is one of my social graces to take a hint when it is given, even if it is a bit like a brick between the eyes." He was aware of the faint hostility in Elwyn's eyes and knew it was because of Michael and Veronica. So they knew too? Had everyone seen the sin he had been committing except himself? A little color rose in his cheeks. "I'll push off then, if my presence offends you." He strolled to the door, then turned with careful casualness. "By the way, it's a pretty raw deal about Carson. Has he a chance, d'you think? Where did you see him last?"

"We were nearly halfway to Kebabo. I was down when this came over. I lost track of him, and then we were ordered to return. I thought he'd be back probably before me." He rose and stretched, yawned meaningly, but something about the younger man's expression caught his attention, a curious, tensed expectancy very foreign to Billy's usual lazy good humor. His arms dropped to his sides. He said sharply, "Just a minute, Billy; what's on your mind?"

He was startled out of his weariness by the swift, wary defiance that came into the younger man's face. He con-

tacted suddenly with the strung-up despair beneath that casually impudent surface.

"What should be on my mind?" Billy shrugged; his handsome eyes avoided Williams' glance; he opened the door and added, "Except natural curiosity. Michael's a good bloke, and he's always been a friend of mine."

"You seem to have forgotten that lately," said Elwyn crisply. "Pity it didn't occur to you when you were paying unwanted and very compromising attentions to Michael's wife."

Williams made a half gesture, as though he would stop her biting words. A look of sheer torture flashed into Billy's eyes, and he turned away swiftly to the door, but Williams caught his arm and swung him back sharply to face him. He met Billy's eyes in a long searching stare.

"You weren't by any chance thinking of sneaking off to look for Carson?" He waited, but Billy did not answer. He did not move, but Williams could feel the nervous irritation beneath his restraining hand. "Perish the thought, my child. Apart from being against orders, it'd be crazy. It would be suicide."

Again there was silence; again the persistent clamor of the storm outside, etching in bold, violent strokes the tense quiet in the small room.

"So that's it," said Williams quietly.

Billy's chin went up; his eyes met Williams' squarely for the first time, and his attempt at his usual jaunty manner was a pitiful failure. "Yes," he said shortly; "that's it."

Williams' hand dropped. The boy had been a fool, a thoughtless, cruel fool, but it was pointless that he should throw his life away over this. He had behaved badly, but he was young enough to learn the things one could and couldn't do in the service. It was bad enough that Carson

was still missing. Besides, Lennard would never get a machine up in this, and if he did what could he do with a compass spinning like a gyro and air thick enough to walk on? Williams knew; he'd just come back through it, and he'd been in the Middle East long enough to know something about it. It seemed he hadn't thought or breathed from the time the gibli caught them in the desert, until he had touched down blindly onto the tarmac at El-Hussar. He was deadly tired now, but someone had to talk the crazy young idiot out of this obsession.

"Now listen to me, young Lennard——" he began.

With sudden violence Billy's restraint snapped. He lost his control and his temper, more with himself than Williams. They didn't understand. How could they? Their consciences weren't gnawing with the memory of two stricken dark eyes. Words poured out of him. "Cut it out, Williams; I'm beyond listening. All that fatherly stuff makes me sick, and it's weeks too late. Why didn't you tell me to listen a month ago, before I started this devil's business? Why didn't you hit me, shoot me, have me locked up? Don't you see, Carson's gone out there thinking"—his voice broke despairingly—"thinking that Veronica—and I——"

Elwyn suddenly rose and put a quiet hand on his arm, her bright, malicious little eyes suddenly misty. He was only a youngster after all. He'd roused forces he couldn't control and now he was suffering for it, suffering with the agonized, absorbed suffering of the young.

She said gently, "All right, Billy, we know——"

He turned to her desperately, pleadingly, thinking he had found an ally. "You understand, don't you, Mrs Williams? I've got to find Michael and bring him back to her. I owe that to her, to them both. I didn't think what I was

doing—I didn't realize—I didn't care much. I was off my head about her, and I thought I'd force her to be as crazy about me as I was about her. I couldn't understand she was scarcely aware of me, that she was only kind because I was Michael's friend. And now I've got to get Michael back to her."

"You can't, Billy," Elwyn said gently. "It's impossible. That's the devil of making a mistake like this; you can't just wipe it out as though it were a chalk mark on a black-board. After all, you've caused a heap of suffering; it's only justice that you should suffer too."

He said awkwardly, because for all his supposed sophistication he was still young enough to feel embarrassment about such things, "Did you know—did she tell you there will be a child? She hasn't told Michael yet. If he should crack up and never know——"

Williams said involuntarily, "Good God!"

And Elwyn, small hands suddenly at her trembling lips, "Poor Veronica."

Their three faces stared, stricken, in the misty yellow dust of the room, all of them facing a human problem to which there was no answer, unless Michael was safe. Billy said slowly, "So you see why I have to find Michael. I came to you because I thought you'd help me. You see, he wrote to her, saying he knew about me and understood. He's got things all wrong. She's afraid he might purposely—not come back. . . ."

Williams came to life with a jerk. "Lot of damned women's nonsense. Probably she's feeling hysterical. Michael's got a fitter with him; you don't suppose he'd take him into eternity with him, do you? But look here, Billy; be reasonable. I understand; we both understand. We're just as anxious to get moving as you are."

"Then what the devil are we waiting for?" the younger man cried.

Williams' lips set in a line of sheer exasperation. With an angry movement he stalked past Billy through the hall and flung open the door. The wind and grit tore through the bungalow like a malignant yellow presence, whirling mats and papers, snatching at curtains, slamming doors, sending the pans in the kitchen swinging and clattering. He pointed up at the whirling smoky fog that completely obscured the sky. "That's what we're waiting for. Look at it. How d'you think you'd get up in that? How far d'you think you'd get if you did? No one but a lunatic would attempt such a thing, and no one is going to attempt it." He slammed the door to and made an attempt at lightness. "Orders is orders, you know, my boy."

"We'll see," said Billy, dangerously quiet.

"See what?"

"See if someone else will help me." The boy pushed past Williams toward the door. "You obviously won't."

It occurred to Williams to forcibly restrain him, but it seemed pointless. The boy was talking, but he wouldn't dare to leave against orders. Few men would care to try to lift a machine clear in the teeth of such a gale, with visibility at zero.

"If you mean I won't help you to kill yourself you're right. Better try the C.O."

"That's what I'll do. Maybe he'll listen to me."

"Maybe he'll go with you and hold your hand," said Williams sarcastically. "He'll put you under open arrest, you damned young fool!"

Without replying Billy wrenched open the door and strode out into the blinding dust.

Elwyn said a little shakily, "You don't suppose he'll go?"

Williams spoke with the confidence of experience: "He'd never get off the ground in this. Listen to it."

Elwyn paused, listening to the storm, dreading to hear another sound that was not the storm. It was one of the worst dust storms she had ever seen. It was almost a sandstorm, and the wind was terrific. It might have been night, so dark was the bungalow, with its doors and shutters fastened tightly. But still the fine layers of dust settled on everything. It was like a creeping, silent threat, the breath of the desert, hot, dry, merciless, and it filled the air with a curious electric quality, almost an emotion. One felt that nature itself was out of control and anything might happen.

Elwyn snatched up a coat and threw it round her shoulders.

"You'd better turn in and get some rest, darling," she said. "I'll go and stay with Veronica." She shivered. "My goodness, fancy *having* to be out in this."

"Plenty of people are out in it," said her husband grimly. "It seems to be getting worse. Listen!" Above the shriek of the wind there came a new sound. "That's not the storm; that's a machine."

They stood perfectly still, straining their ears to hear above the wind. The noise grew into the full-throated roar of an engine moving on full throttle.

Williams swore, quietly and fluently, forgetting the presence of his wife, expressing the tired exasperation of his weary senses; he gave his exact opinion of Billy and all emotional young fools with no sense of discipline. Then, snatching up his hat, he thrust open the door and raced across to the tarmac. He waited, half expecting to

hear the terrible impact and then the awful stillness that follows a crash, but the steady beat of Billy's engines came back to the drome as he circled at what Williams estimated to be a few hundred feet. It was impossible to see more than a couple of yards, but his eyes instinctively followed the sound of the engine as it passed overhead and went away toward the desert. He turned helplessly away. By some miracle of luck the youngster had got up.

A sergeant and a few fitters stood staring into the thick blanket of dust.

"Was it Mr Lennard who just took off?" Williams demanded.

"Yes sir. Said he had orders, sir."

"Orders, hell! Why didn't you stop him?"

"Stop him, sir?" The sergeant looked pained. The idea of a sergeant stopping an officer leaving the drome was new to him.

"All right, all right. Get the airman of the watch. Oh, all right, here he is." Another perturbed figure came through the dust toward them. "Did Mr Lennard sign the log?"

"Mr Lennard? No sir. I haven't seen Mr Lennard. Adjutant's orders, no flying until further met. report was through, sir. Heard someone take off. Don't know who it was, sir."

"Give me the log; I'll sign it." As he stood angrily, filling in the particulars of Billy's machine, Martin came stumbling through the fog toward them, leaning heavily against the wind.

"Somebody crazy?" he shouted. "What's going on here?"

"Lennard pushed off," Williams said savagely. "Got an idea he'd locate Carson."

"D'you mean he's just bunged off alone?" Martin's face was a study. "Silly young ass." There was a pause while each stared into the impenetrable dust. Martin gave a long, incredulous whistle, then raised his hand to the invisible sky with the grim flippancy of the service. "So long, Billy boy."

"Cut that out," said Williams irritably. "He got up; let's hope he has the same devil's luck until he gets down. He'll be lucky if he doesn't hit a funnel and pull a wing off."

"Well, he knew enough to take off without piling up," Martin said, and there was a touch of admiration in his voice. He added cautiously, "The old man will have to know."

Williams shrugged. "You're telling me? And I'll have to report, can't do anything else." He turned to the airman of the watch. "Have the fire picket stand by with flares. Prepare for a night landing." He moved off toward the C.O.'s office with a grim expression on his weary, dust-coated face.

Two minutes later he was facing the C.O. across his desk. Squadron Leader Crichton had taken the news that one of his younger officers had committed a flagrant breach of discipline with considerable equanimity. There was not much that went on under his command that he was not aware of, and he had been aware of the Carson-Lennard triangle for some time. He had been hoping to get Billy off to India before any scandal broke. Privately he had no doubts whatever as to Veronica's entire innocence in the matter, but he had expected some sort of trouble ever since she had arrived at El-Hussar. In his bachelor mind she was "too damned good looking to be good for discipline." He knew those serene, shiningly

feminine women; he had come across them before. Men always lost their heads over them, and then the other women were jealous and complicated matters. He filled his pipe, watching the precise packing of the tobacco with grave eyes.

"Any idea what his reason was, Williams?"

"Yes sir." Williams hesitated. "I gather he fancies Carson may have taken this matter of Mrs Carson seriously."

"That all?"

"Well, I gather that Mrs Carson is afraid Carson may be looking for trouble. Write things off, so to speak. You know what women are," he added apologetically.

"And naturally she blames Lennard."

The C.O. rose irritably. "Damned ridiculous. Carson's a responsible man. He has a fitter with him, and there's Halton. Lennard's an emotional young fool."

"Quite, sir."

Neither of the men entertained for a moment Veronica's fears. Michael had gone out to find Halton; if he did not return it would be an accident; he was not the sort of man who recklessly endangered the lives of others. But it made it none the less tragic for Veronica.

"All right, I'll attend to Mr Lennard . . . if he comes back," Crichton added grimly. He picked up the telephone. "Signals. 'P' message. Inform all stations that Flying Officer Lennard left three minutes ago. Searching patrol." He met Williams' eyes and the officer breathed a sigh of relief. The old man was all right. Decent sort; bit of a psychologist in his way. He supposed you had to be for his job. "Heading south-southwest. Call him until he replies and let me know the moment you hear from him."

Chapter Twenty-Three

BILLY HAD BEEN FLYING with his throttle hard against the stop for over an hour. The sun had vanished long ago and the night sky had closed down on him like a soft, dark cloak glittering with a million points of fire. The air was wonderfully clear. A gigantic moon, so close he felt he could reach up and touch its polished silver face, lit the desert, turning that dull gray expanse into a shimmering silvery lake. It seemed to him that even the roar of the engine was subdued to harmonize with that stillness, the silence and solitude of that limitless space. He slipped down to a thousand feet and stared down. The moon, radiant and still as only a desert moon can be, laid over all the earth a mantle of exquisite delicacy, the gleaming hillocks and fantastic shadows were caught in that flood of unearthly beauty, mingled, merged and were lost, to form again in other strange silvery shapes.

He had had one idea when he had taken off into the gritty, tearing, blinding wind—to get height. To get

above it. As he had jammed his throttle hard forward the machine had quivered like a live thing and bounded eagerly into the gale. The wind was blowing hard across the tarmac and he had headed straight into it. As he had gathered ground speed he had had the greatest difficulty in holding an even keel, and the tail had bumped alarmingly. He had glanced round for the wind indicator, more from habit than anything else, but the hangars and the whole camp were already swallowed up in that terrifying, slashing, smoky wind. A sense of utter remoteness swept over him. It was as though he stood alone in a strange world far from the things he knew and understood. He remembered he had experienced much the same sensation during his first solo flight. It wasn't fear. He was too determined to feel fear, but a momentary sensation that he had lost grip on something, that forces outside his control had him in their hands, lifting him, as though he were a plaything, dropping him, hurling him carelessly and indifferently about.

It was as though the storm opposed him, as though some evil force was out to prevent him making good the damage he had done, dreadful, perhaps irreparable damage to two human hearts. But the same mood that had brought him out of Williams' bungalow into the machine still possessed him. He had a queer triumphant feeling of being above nature. Nothing could stop him now except death. Savagely he fought the controls, struggling with every ounce of his strength to bring the machine to an even keel again and get her head on his course. He stared at the instrument panel; the needle was quivering and vibrating like an altimeter in a spin. Billy had heard of electrical storms, but he had never

in all his life dreamed they could play such havoc with instruments.

He must get height, sufficient height to get clear of this raging yellow dust monster, sufficient height for him to see the sinking sun and get his bearings. At a thousand feet the sky seemed lighter in the west; it was the sunlight struggling through the curtain of dust. He had never heard of a gibli reaching such a height before; it was usually a severe ground current that lifted the loose surface. Another two thousand feet and he was gazing with relief at the vast dome of ash-blue heavens, pale and lovely, with the sun, a gigantic disc of red fire, dropping rapidly to the horizon. Below him a heavy blanket of yellowish gray completely obscured the earth.

He was through. He ought to contact signals, but he knew that the first message would advise him to return immediately. Billy knew what the hidden command behind that "advise" would mean. He tuned in, picked up the persistent, nagging call, seeking his whereabouts, and switched off again with a grin. He wasn't replying; he wasn't arguing. He'd burned his boats and it was too late to argue now, unless he found Michael.

The plane was moving normally. Below the dust storms were moving steadily northwest. He headed toward the heart of the Sahara in the direction of Kebabo. Somewhere in the thousand miles of waste that lay between Kebabo and El-Hussar he would find Michael. He must find Michael or go on into eternity . . . alone.

And now it was night and moonlight and he had seen nothing, no flare, no glimpse of anything that might be a plane or the wreck of a plane. It was like searching eternity for an atom. His eyes began to feel hot and heavy as weariness crept over him, but he had to go on as

long as his fuel lasted. He couldn't go back. He had come between a man and his wife; he had come between two who loved and thrust them thoughtlessly and cruelly apart. For such as him there was no retreat. The messages he picked up from time to time told him the storm was lessening, although it had not yet cleared from the El-Hussar district. But out here, four hundred miles on his course, it was utterly clear. Below he could see the limitless, unbroken space, not a ruined village, not a caravan, just the gray, unreal landscape washed to fairy silver by the moonlight, a mockery of emptiness, of the futility of his effort.

Suddenly he sat up with a jerk against the safety belt. Was that a trick of the moonlight? He closed his eyes sharply for a moment and stared again. It was still there. Fire. . . . Without doubt it was fire of some sort. It grew larger and clearer every moment. He ruddered to port and brought the mysterious glow in line with the nose of his machine. It was probably a tribe of Bedouin. He had been flying for over two hours; he must be nearly halfway to Kebabo. The fire might be a little-known water hole that had attracted a small tribe, but his map gave no clue to such a place. Despite the speed of his machine it was several minutes before he was near enough to make out the outline of a plane. It was standing on its nose in the slope of some high dunes, its tail pointed pathetically toward the sky.

He put his nose down and as he flashed low over the crash he peered down, yelling madly to the frantically waving figures below. Michael and his fitter. He thrilled with triumph. Now he'd talk; now he'd answer them. As he leveled off a red Verry light soared into the air, curved into a graceful arc and dropped back to earth. It

was dangerous to land there. Michael was warning him.

He tuned into signals and spoke rapidly into the microphone. The cold, official words seemed hopelessly inadequate. He wanted to shout with exultation; he wanted to yell over the air, "Listen. . . . Veronica, I've found him. Don't be frightened; don't worry any more, my lovely one; he's safe!" That'd be a nice kettle of fish. What would the old man say to that? That'd take a packet of explaining. He grinned and began formally, "Lennard calling El-Hussar. Hallo. El-Hussar . . ." and as the reply flashed back said, praying someone would have the sense to go at once and tell her, "Lennard calling El-Hussar. Found Carson. Carson crashed. Carson uninjured. Landing. . . . Hold it." For the ghost outline of another machine caught his eye. Halton? The exultation dropped from him. That was a write-off if ever he had seen one. So tangled and distorted was the heap of wreckage that only a pilot would have recognized it as a plane at all. It looked like the crumbled bones of some great beast that had died in the desert. He called El-Hussar again, reported the second crash, gave his position and circled slowly, waiting for a signal from below.

At last it came, a white ball of fire flung suddenly into the air from some distance to his left. He watched its direction for an indication of the wind. Another light followed and he dipped toward it. Three feet from the ground he dropped his tail onto the safe surface of a mud flat. As his plane slowed to a halt he scrambled from the cockpit almost into Michael's arms.

There was an odd, strained silence. They were quite alone in the great expanse of desert. Michael had guided him down with flares. The fitter was across the sand dunes, by the nose-tilted machine and the fire of petrol-soaked

rags that had first caught Billy's eyes. Halton, a recumbent figure, lay moaning near by.

Billy looked at Michael, meeting that aloof, incurious glance. Odd how he'd never noticed the change in him. How different was this gaunt, haggard giant to the man he had been when Billy had first come to El-Hussar, the man he had seen playing tennis so brilliantly and effortlessly that first day, that first day when it seemed to him he had seen Veronica for the first time. This Michael was like the Michael of the early days at Seadon, hard-faced, unapproachable, the old wound on his cheek showing starkly in his bronzed skin. Billy felt tongue-tied and ashamed before him. He had so much to say, and yet he did not know how to begin.

Michael broke the silence curtly.

"El-Hussar has been cramming the air for you for the last two hours. I knew you'd left but never expected to see you. I don't think anyone else expected to see you again either. Have you contacted them?"

"Yes. I told them I had found you and was landing. Gave them the position. Someone will be here soon after dawn if that damned gibli blows itself out before then."

They spoke in the coolly, casual official tone. Not one word of the woman who stood between them, the woman they both loved. Not one word of why Billy had come, flying against orders, risking his life and his career to come on this reckless quest. They turned toward the other machines, Michael's standing absurdly on its nose, the moonlight shining on its fuselage, the other a complete wreck.

"That Halton?" asked Billy.

"Yes. I sighted it and came down to determine if it really was a machine or a caravan. The dust was coming

up thick then, and I couldn't see ten feet. I'd just heard we were to return when I sighted him. I had to get down really low, and I dragged my wheels on a dune and was up on my nose before I could slip my belt. We're lucky to be alive."

"Is he hurt?"

Michael nodded grimly. "Pretty bad. Both thighs gone. His water spilled when he crashed. I've used most of mine on him. Poor devil was nearly dead with thirst, but we daren't let him drink."

"I've got water and emergency rations," Billy said slowly. "I'll take off presently and get a weather report from El-Hussar. If it's clear there you'd better take him back straight away."

Michael said strangely, "I take him back?"

"Yes. That's why I came. You've to get back . . . to Veronica."

There was an odd, strained silence, then Michael said with swift anxiety, "She's well?"

"Yes, but——" Billy swung round to face him. His eyes were bright and angry, angry with himself. All the things he had been meaning to say were lost. He wanted to tell Michael the truth, as one man to the other, and when he spoke he stammered like an impulsive schoolboy. He could not know that his impulsive sincerity carried a deeper ring of truth than any prepared speech might have done. "That's why I've come—because she wants you. Why d'you think I came out here without permission? Because of you? Because I felt heroic? Not on your life. I came because—because I couldn't go on living either, with Veronica hating me, blaming me for your death."

"You mean you took off without permission?"

"Yes."

Michael whistled softly. "So that's the cause of all the urgency."

Billy seized his arm, forcing him to face him.

"Michael, you've got to listen. Once you were my friend. I know I've shown a pretty poor brand of friendship, but you've got to listen. She showed me the letter you wrote. I'll never forget the way she looked at me. As though I'd murdered you. You're all wrong, Michael. Veronica isn't like that; there was never anything between us."

Michael's face didn't change. His eyes and face were like cold, carved stone in the moonlight. "You mean," he said deliberately, "you aren't in love with her?"

"Hell, no!" Billy's tone changed rebelliously. "You know Veronica. One doesn't fall out of love with women of her kind; there aren't enough of them. But I'm clearing out. If I don't get the boot over this I'll be leaving in a month."

"If it's you she cares for it's better that I should leave. It's better that she should go back to England until we can get things straight," Michael said expressionlessly.

Billy's patience snapped.

"You fool. You damned and utter fool. She doesn't care for me. She doesn't know I exist. I tell you you're killing her, Michael. You remember before, over Alan? What would have happened to her then if you'd not taken her in hand? She was desperate, and she's desperate now, because it's much more—it's real now—the real thing. Oh, I know it looked black against her. How could you know how I pestered her with flowers and letters, followed her about? And she was so patient. She always is with me. I was your friend, you see, and once I saved your life."

Michael stood for a moment without speaking; his face had not changed. Then he said, "Get the water. I must take it over to Halton. We've hardly any left."

Billy barred his way, desperately earnest, forgetting, perhaps for the first time in his spoiled young life, entirely about himself. Even in that valiant, reckless flight of his there had been a hint of braggadocio, but now he was utterly sincere, trying to make Michael believe the truth.

"Michael, you've got to believe me, for Veronica's sake."

"You forget when you said good-by to her in the hotel garden. You forget I saw that good-by."

"If you'd looked a second longer," said Billy furiously, "you'd have seen me well slapped for my pains. Veronica had scarcely spoken to me that week. That afternoon she got into difficulties bathing, and I happened to be there and helped her in. She couldn't very well refuse my company back to the hotel. I took advantage of her kindness. I wasn't going to see her again, and if the whole world saw I was going to take one kiss away with me. I suppose Alise drew your attention to it." He turned away, his shoulders hunched despairingly. "That's the simple truth, Michael. If you don't believe me I'll take that machine up again. Help will come to you before dawn. I'll fly until I've no fuel left, straight on over the desert. You've to go back to Veronica and you've to go back believing in her, or I can't go back. I just can't face the hurt I've done to her; that's all."

Michael turned and looked into the boy's flushed, anxious face, searching his eyes as though he would see through into his soul. All the vanity, the careless conceit and self-assurance was gone; there was only honesty and a desperate, anxious appeal. It seemed to him suddenly

that the desert was a shining lake of silver. He put his hand quickly on Billy's shoulder, and his rare, sweet smile flashed out. "All right, Billy," he said slowly, "we're quits now."

Billy seemed to crumble with relief. Automatically he turned to his machine. The engine was still running, retarded. He untied the *chargul* or canvas water bottle on the leading edge of the wing and handed it to Michael; looking into his face, it seemed as though in these last few minutes he had been born again, so great was the change written there. The scar that ran down his cheek had faded; the tensivity had gone; his eyes were Michael's eyes, grave, humorous, understanding. Michael was alive again. He took the water from Billy's hands.

"Thanks." He grinned suddenly. "And take that damned kite up and get through to signals. It's for the C.O. to say which one of us is to bring him in. You've issued quite enough orders for one day, Mr Lennard."

It was typical of Michael, making the moment of emotion easy with ordinary words. Billy felt a great relief, a great easing of strain. He felt free, as he had not felt free for many days. He knew then why his love for Veronica had been so unhappy, because all the time he had been pursuing her he had been losing his friend. He would go away; he had to, for his own peace of mind. It would be a long time before her gentle beauty ceased to ache in his blood. But he would go with a clear conscience, his mind at ease. And someday the three of them would meet as friends again. He had learned Michael's way of love now. Service and sacrifice, understanding; without these passion was a base thing. Veronica would be happy; that was what he wanted more than anything, more than life, and he had not lost his friend. He squared

his shoulders with an odd, boyish gesture and held out his hand. Their eyes and hands met briefly before Billy turned away.

"All right, youngster, go up and get that report. We've to get Halton into your plane, and it's going to be a tricky business."

Five minutes later Billy touched down again. Now that the moon was overhead visibility was almost as good as daylight.

"All clear," Billy shouted. He climbed out of the cockpit, leaving the engine idling and ran across the thick, soft sand to where Michael and the fitter bent over Halton's limp, moaning figure. "Signals report as clear as crystal. Bright moonlight. Drome staff is standing by, and 'B' Flight is leaving at once." He paused, glanced at Michael. "The C.O. says if it is possible to move Halton you're to bring him in at once." He paused for breath and Michael looked at him steadily.

"The C.O. said that?" asked Michael dubiously.

"He certainly did."

"All right. You win." He bent over Halton. "Give me a hand and be gentle. He's badly hurt." He smiled down into Halton's agonized face reassuringly. "Try to stick it, old man. We'll have you in hospital within three hours."

Together the three men lifted the injured pilot and bore him across the sand to Billy's plane. Fortunately he lost consciousness by the time they had lowered him and secured him in the rear cockpit. Michael's lips tightened as he climbed in. He must make good time for Halton's sake.

Billy stood back, his hand raised in salute. "Good-by. Give Veronica my love. Perhaps she'll forgive me now."

"Perhaps she'll forgive us both," said Michael.

Billy grinned and came closer; a little mischievous light came into his eyes. "She's got something to tell you, something important. Don't get too damned conceited when you hear, old man."

Michael looked at him uncomprehendingly, then understanding came into his eyes. He remembered Veronica's white delicacy of the evening before, and a sudden anger surged within him. Anger against himself, against Billy, against the whole breed of men for their blind, blundering, selfish masculine cruelty. His hands went to the controls and in a minute the plane was climbing, a droning silver speck in the moonlit sky.

The first pale gray light of dawn, before the sun came up in rose-and-golden glory, stroking the shimmering minarets like the fingers of Allah, was touching the eastern sky. The dust storm had swept away, leaving a sky of incomparable calm and beauty, and as Michael circled above the drome at El-Hussar he could see in the dry, rolling sand dunes beyond the camp the stirrings of life. Bedouins already moving their encampments, the black tents that sprung up like mushrooms during the night, flocks being driven to the rare, sparse grazing lands, the blue-coated Felaheen going out to their fields nearer to the city's outskirts . . . below the ground staff, an ambulance ready for Halton, waited for him to touch down.

A few minutes later the C.O., looking, like the rest of the staff, as though he needed a good night's rest, congratulated him brusquely when he went in to report.

"Nice work, Carson. Pity you piled up though."

"It's nothing much, sir. Afraid Halton's bus is a complete write-off though."

"Humph. The M.O. seems to think they'll pull him through."

"It was nice work on Lennard's part too," said Michael casually. "These few hours may mean the difference between life and death for Halton."

Crichton shot him a quick glance under his bushy gray brows.

"Ye-es," he said with heavy sarcasm, "I must speak to Mr Lennard when he gets in." Michael's heart lightened. Billy was going to get off with a dressing-down. These curt, sarcastic interviews were dreaded by the younger officers. The old man could make you feel like a worm if he wished, but he didn't even bother to do that unless he thought you were worth while as an officer and a pilot. That was something. Crichton held out his hand.

"Glad you got back safely, Carson." His eyes twinkled. "You'd better report to Mrs Carson. I understand she's been anxious. By the way, if you're thinking of applying for leave I think it could be managed." He moved the papers on his desk absently. "I understand the Nile trip wasn't such a success." He added hurriedly, "From a health point of view. A little English air might chase the remains of that fever away—eh?"

Michael colored and understood. Go home—get away, until tongues stopped wagging and things returned to normal. The old man knew everything, bless him. He saluted.

"Thank you, sir! I think I will."

Chapter Twenty-Four

VERONICA WAS ASLEEP. TWO hours after midnight she had still been sitting with Elwyn Williams, waiting, white and tireless, for some news to come through. There was no word from either Michael or Billy, and the storm was blowing itself out, the dust beginning to settle at last. A polished silver moon beginning to show through the ragged murk of the sky. And then at last the sound of footsteps outside, the knock on the door, and the airman of the watch outside, beaming with relief. Both she and Michael were popular, and the man had slipped across immediately Billy's message had come through.

"All right, Mrs Carson, Mr Lennard's just got through. Found Mr Carson nearly halfway to Kebabo."

Veronica stood up. He was alive. She said faintly, "Is he hurt?" Her lips seemed stiff, unable to form the words.

"Reported uninjured, ma'am; sighted Halton and dragged his wheels in a sand dune flying low in the dust storm to observe the other machine." His official tone

relapsed, and he smiled broadly. "He'll be back in a couple of hours, ma'am. Now you get some rest."

He went out, and Veronica sat down abruptly. She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Her face was white, her teeth chattering, but her eyes were like stars.

"I'll wait up for him," she said.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Elwyn practically. "You'll go to bed like a civilized being."

She stayed there and saw Veronica into bed, well tucked in, mosquito nets drawn and a glass of warm milk by her side, for she had had no food since midday when she had first heard that Michael was missing. Then Elwyn went home with the sense of a deed well done. She had that light-footed, lighthearted sense of relief that comes from skirting the edge of tragedy. She could have sung with relief, although her eyes were dropping with weariness.

Veronica fell asleep, a deep, dreamless, secure sleep such as she had not known for many nights. She was at home, and Michael was coming back to her, really coming back to her. Michael, not the frigid, polite, distant stranger who had left her. She knew somehow that he was really coming back to her, that at last he understood. She would never know what they had said to each other that night in the desert, but Michael was coming back, so Billy must have paid his debt and kept his promise.

And so Michael found her, smiling a little, one arm thrown back across the pillow, breathing as peacefully as a child, but when he bent over her, breathing her sweetness, taking care not to soil her shining fragility with his dusty, sweat-stained hands and clothes, he could see the tear marks below her lashes, and his little hurt exclamation awakened her. She opened her eyes, put up

her arms and drew him down, all weary and dirty as he was, close to the sweet haven of her breast. They stayed, close together, still and in silence, for a long moment, and neither of them was far from tears.

Presently he said, "Forgive me, Veronica."

"We have to forgive each other," she said quietly, "for not guarding our love better. Perhaps, after all, Alise was right, darling; we were too sure."

Presently he rose to bath and change. Through the shutters the golden sunshine was pouring in long spears of yellow light. There was a sound of engines and voices about the tarmac, and within the bungalow Mustapha and Ali were already busy, endeavoring to expel the thin, fine dust the storm had left on everything. There was an appetizing smell of coffee and toast from the kitchen. Michael came back in his dressing gown, clean and shaved, his bronze hair shining wetly, looking, Veronica thought tenderly, very young. He held the porcelain cupid in his hand.

"You had it mended?" he asked.

"Yes. There was such an odd little Frenchwoman in the hotel, a chambermaid. She brought it to me, and she said"—her soft dark eyes met Michael's blue ones gravely and thrilled to a glow that shone in their depths—"we'd take greater care of it now—we'd value it more, now we'd so nearly lost it. She was speaking of the cupid, but of course she meant love."

He put the tiny painted figure down on the bedside table and sat beside her, taking her in his arms. "It can't ever be broken again, Michael; it's safe now forever. I've set a seal on it here, below my heart."

"It's true then," he said huskily.

"Did Billy say anything?"

"Yes. I wasn't sure if he meant it or whether it was one of his schemes for making me come back to you." He raised her hand and set his lips against it. "We're going back to England; you'll like that, won't you?"

"Yes. I'd like to see Mother, but we'll come back?"

"Yes."

"I've suffered here, but I've been marvelously happy. I am marvelously happy. I love Egypt—I'd like my son to love it too."

He said, "I'm so happy for you, Veronica."

"For us, darling."

"For us!"

He drew her into his arms in a long embrace—out in the hall Ali, busy with his broom, threw open the door to let in the streaming sunshine of a new day.

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